

PROFILE: HILARY PRICE by Lisa Oram

Still Fresh and Pulpy

Cartoonist Hilary Price draws on 10 years of syndication

Hilary Price speaks intently, scrunching her eyebrows and gesturing with her hands. Her eyes sparkle and she smiles, but she is not cracking jokes. Price is earnest about her craft and its place in the world. "If we were sitting here with *Cosmopolitans*, I'd be funny," she insists. "I'd be really funny."

Price, 36, has just rounded the corner on 10 years as the nation's youngest female syndicated cartoonist. Her comic strip, *Rhymes with Orange*, appears daily and on Sundays in over 125 newspapers. In our area, Price's work appears in Springfield's *The Republican*, the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* and *The Boston Globe*.

At her studio in Florence, Massachusetts, Price makes a cup of coffee, drops in a sugar cube and comments, "I love sugar cubes. They are so fun." She says she is often amused by the world around her, which in turn becomes the world of *Rhymes with Orange*. The short strip has no set characters but stars an assortment of animals and people. It offers a running commentary on work, relationships, family, pets, holidays—the things, Price says, that make up our everyday lives. While the strip taps into those universals, its offbeat perspective is as unique as its title. (Nothing, in fact, rhymes with "orange"—though Price admits to being challenged with a few almost-rhymes over the years.)

A self-educated artist, Price's spare line drawings and subtle humor recall the work of children's writer Shel Silverstein and *New Yorker* cartoonist George Booth, both of whom Price cites as influences. "Hilary has a wonderful fluidity of the pen...when the simplicity of line can convey so much, it takes great talent," says acclaimed cartoonist, greeting card artist and children's book author Sandra Boynton, another formative influence.

"I would love to take credit for Hilary," Boynton laughs when reminded of the story Price tells about learning that the signature "Boynton" belonged to a woman. While

Price hadn't consciously felt excluded from the world of cartooning, neither had she realized that it was something women did. "Sandra changed the weave of the fabric that made up my world," Price says. "I hope I can be a similar influence on other girls."

As a kid, Price loved writing as well as doodling. She majored in English at Stanford University and worked as an advertising copywriter in temporary positions for a few years after college. During that time, she "peddled" cartoons to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and got published, her first appearance in a major U.S. newspaper. Price realized that to actually make a living as a cartoonist she would need to be syndicated. She sent out several packets of her comics and got lucky; King Features Syndicate gave her a trial run and signed her on in 1995.

A few years later, Price headed back to Massachusetts where she had grown up. She now lives in Florence with her partner Kerry Labounty and an assortment of pets. Rocky, their boisterous puppy whom Price describes as "part colie and part elephant," often accompanies her to work.

Notwithstanding Rocky, her job is largely solitary. Price works on six daily comics and one Sunday color comic each week, moving among them until each one gels. The hardest part is getting started, she says, but the tight deadlines do not afford much procrastination. Price estimates that it takes two to four hours to complete one comic strip. "By three hours and 59 minutes, it feels like the dumbest thing I've ever seen," she says.

Price pauses—"Oh, Rocky...."—and removes a travel mug from the dog's drooly jaws, handing him a rubber dog bone instead.

"Contact with readers breathes life back into the work," she continues. She loves it when readers say, "Oh, that's so true," about what she has written. Of course, not all readers respond favorably. Over the

years, readers who've disapproved of her work have pushed Price to reflect on the nature of humor—her own and others'. "When asked to defend yourself, you learn to think about how you make things funny," she says.

Price recently heard from a reader who complained about a cartoon in which a beefy-looking white guy named Rocko is shown in an alley about to punch a smaller white guy in the face. The reader felt the cartoon slandered Italian Americans.

In response, Price wrote that she agreed with part of the note: the comic did rely on a stereotype for its humor. All humor does, she maintained. Cartoonists, especially, need a shorthand that communicates a lot in a little space.

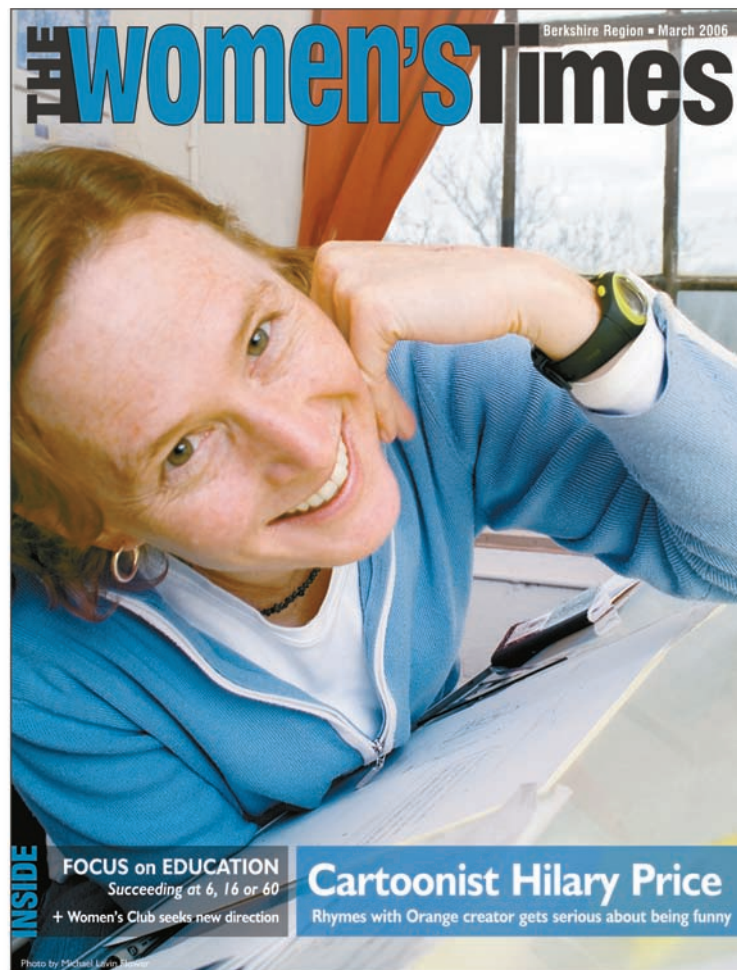
"For example," Price says, "God in comic strips is always going to be a white man with a long beard in heaven—the stereotype of God. You could have a woman up there, but then the joke would have to be about God being a woman."

Similarly, Price explains, readers interpret two comic-strip women in a bar as friends, probably trying to meet guys. A man and a woman in a bar—they're a couple. Those are readers' assumptions, so that's the shorthand.

Price adds that people often ask her why she doesn't show more same-sex couples, especially since she herself is partnered with a woman. She says, "If I show the two women in a bar, and then try to also convey that they are a couple...and then make a joke" that has nothing to do with them being a couple, "I'll end up with half an inch of my strip for the joke."

She points to another strip in which a rhinoceros is sitting in a doctor's office. The rhino says to the doctor: "Remove the horn. In my mind, I've always been a hippo." Price was challenged by a reader about being insensitive to the transgender community.

"I'm not surprised that Hilary sometimes offends people—we all do," adds



Sandra Boynton, whose work, by her own admission, is far from controversial. "I did a book on pajamas in which I dressed a boar in extravagantly over-the-top pajamas that were meant to be ugly. I got mail from one, maybe even two readers who objected to the concept that anything in this world is ugly."

"In every piece of humor, there is the tiniest, smallest, lower case, little piece of mean in there because humor is about status changing," acknowledges Price. "A guy is walking. A guy slips on a banana peel and falls. His status has changed from someone walking to someone who's flat out."

In creating her strips, Price asks herself one question as a guide: "Am I being cruel?" Mean is okay, she says. Cruel is not.

But you don't know how it feels, the transgendered reader responds.

Price says she's been thinking lately about the you-can-only-make-jokes-about-identity-groups-to-which-you-belong convention. She mentions Sarah Silverman, a young stand-up comedian who flies in the face of such unwritten rules.

"Sarah Silverman says the most surprising and 'inappropriate' things, one after another. You keep expecting her to say, 'just kidding,' but she never does," Price notes.

Price traces the recent history of comedy from white guys who made fun of racial and ethnic minorities by wearing blackface or squinting their eyes, to members of any group empowered (and restrained) by identity politics to play on stereotypes of their own group, to comedians such as Silverman who say any-

thing about anyone.

Like Silverman, Price takes her turn at whatever "shiny object is passing my life at that point." Nothing is sacred.

"Hilary is hardly Howard Stern," says Boynton. "She has a razor sharp, gentle sensibility. Her observations are unique, benevolent and insightful."

Ten years into syndication with five more years on her contract, Price hopes *Rhymes with Orange* remains "fresh and pulpy," as the tagline on her website claims. Price says her audience has expanded beyond its original core of Gen-Xers (a label she doesn't much like) to reach the many "smart, witty, good-looking people" of various ages Price thinks of as her readers. It's not a movement Price intended; it's just that "from about 25 to 65, we're all dealing with the same things."

If not a cartoonist, Price is not sure what she'd be... not a pizza maker, she says, having been fired from that job. Not a copywriter—when it came time to be hired permanently at the ad agency, the creative director told Price, "I'm not giving you the job. But I know you're going to make it."

"What a gift," Price says with relief in her voice.

What she'd really love, she decides, is to be a professional party-goer. She pauses again, wrestles a cracker box away from Rocky, and greets Jamoka, a black lab from down the hall who has jumped the baby gate in her open doorway. Reaching past the bowl of sugar cubes, Price grabs the box of dog biscuits. "Treats for everyone," she grins.

Lisa Oram is a freelance writer in Amherst, Mass.



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