

essay

American Comic Books: Forty Years of Fun

by Rebecca Haque

MY paper is brief, and an attempt at a concise expression of my life-long attachment to American culture as much as a projection of my indefinable relationship with my own nation and its culture.

Cultural critics, it is true, see works of art in terms of the message they impart. It is also true that we process all information and images with a complex subjectivity. So, if this paper appears somewhat solipsistic, I beg your indulgence.

I started gorging on comic books in kindergarten. As a five-year-old, I hopped with Little Lotta and painted rainbows with Little Dot and flew to exotic South Sea islands with Richie Rich — his deliciously named Butler Cadbury today merges fluidly in my mind with those other famous gentlemen's gentlemen, Wodehouse's Jeeves and Ishiguro's Stevens. I laughed at the antics of Casper, the friendly ghost, and I marvelled at Popeye's devotion to Olive Oil, without realizing that, thirty-five years later, I could fall into the trap of reductive revisionism that made Popeye a high-flying, peripatetic today of the American Spinach Growers' Association.

As a ten-year-old, I discovered Walt Disney — Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse and good "ole" Goofy and little Pluto, the astronomically named dog. I said hello to Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty in the pages of the Junior Illustrated Classics and marvelled at the beauty of the story-book heroines and wondered what my chances were of meeting Prince Charming and having my feet shod with glass slippers. (Incidentally, through the courtesy of the USIS, in July-1995, I was able to pay homage to Uncle Walt and appreciate his lifelong devotion to family values. However, as I sauntered through the many lands of Disneyland in my Kumudini shalwar-kameez, I realized that my multiculturalism and my multilin-

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gualism were a barrier to my full participation in a totally American ritual. Part of me stood apart and distinct, with my mind automatically registering the incredible efficiency of the park's administrative machinery. Another part of me was overwhelmed by the waves of Spanish-speaking voices all around me, and my mind against automatically noted the shifting demographics of Los Angeles with its steady influx of Hispanics from across the border. In the end my trip to Disneyland became yet one more exercise in twentieth-century American studies. And more. It reminded me with a force and suddenness I had never known before of the woeful economic disparity between this nation and my own nation. As I stood near uncle Walt's statue and the fireworks emblazoned the night sky with diamonds and the electric parade went gaily by cheered on by infants and toddlers and skittish, unruly boys and girls from ever part of the world, I felt an infinite sorrow for those naked children of my land whose innocence has been stolen by a Hobbesian Rakhshas).

In my adolescent years, MAD imploded in my consciousness. I was having intense affairs with several men — Salinger and Updike Cheever and O'Hara and Roth and Miller (Henry, not Arthur), but the grinning, elfin Alfred E. Neuman of "Portzbie — what me, worry?" and the cheesy underarms swept me off my feet. He draped me with his own inimitable brand of irreverent humour; with irony and satire and parody; and honed my own intellect and wit.

MAD's serial, "What the Shadow

Knows," was my first introduction to Freudian psychology, and it helped me develop an intuitive understanding of people's motives and intentions long before later adult encounters with psychologists and human behavioural scientists gave me theories with which to engirdle that knowledge. Now, today, if I am at all adept at picking up signals of malfunction and dysfunction in the behaviour of others or of mine, it is because my adolescent mind was forced to confront and ponder the inexplicable relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. Today, I read people like Havelock Ellis and Freud and Jung and Karen Horney and Erickson to prop up my study of serious literature, but I go to MAD for a healthy does of sidesplitting, hysterical laughter. I am addicted — I need a "fix" from time to time.

I came across McLuhan's *Understanding Media* in my twenties as an undergraduate, foraging in cupboards full of books in my grandfather's old house. There, in the pages of McLuhan's classic study, I read his tribute to MAD as a new powerful sociological phenomenon. But as I read, I thought, I don't need McLuhan to tell me this. I know this! For years MAD had been my own guide through the labyrinth of social anthropology and up the staircase into market economics (I still remember one special MAD issue I read in my teens on "built-in obsolescence" of mass-produced goods, and today, when I see the inenifable blow-outs of light-bulbs all over the house, I remember MAD, and I think, "so, this is how you make your money," and I question the values of the manufacturers of mass-

market-products. Can we, I think can we, with our large cash-starved populace really afford to let ourselves be spun round and round by the marketing strategies of large houses of commercial enterprise? I think not!

Peanuts and *Archie's* comics were my constant companions too. There are no adults in Charles M. Schulz's cartoon world *Peanuts* — only pre-school and first-grade kids. I love them all. I love poor role Charley Brown and I like to think that when he grows up Violet will see what a nice, dependable guy he really is and will marry him. I like to think that the prodigy Linus, who at the age of three can see Impressionist landscapes in the shapes of cumulus clouds, will one day give up his pre-oedipal thumb-sucking and his security blanket for the love of a vibrant, sensual woman who will inspire him to reach for the heaven that exceeds his grapes. I like to think that wonderful, irresistible, irrepressible, gutsy, feisty Lucky, who wants to marry the scornful handsome, blonde musical genius Schroeder who can play Mozart sonatas and Beethoven concertos on a toy piano, will in the end be able to make him fall desperately in love with her. I like to think that the world of *Peanuts* will forever remain fresh and innocent and good and tranquil. (I recommend that all adults read *Peanuts* — it is very good therapy, and it will save one from squandering hard-earned lucre on a jaded psychoanalyst. Especially, adults desperately seeking to connect with their "inner child" would benefit enormously from a recuperative romp through Peanut land).

Riverdale of *Archie's* is the

quintessential American small town, not far removed from Rome, (Wisconsin of television's *Picket Fences*.) But Rome belongs to the Nineties and has its share of urban squalor — bizarre murders and child molesters and rapists and transvestite priests and sex deviants and forced desegregation and the ever-present threat of the flight of solid citizens from decaying neighbourhoods. Riverdale, on the other hand, remains blissfully free of such pernicious contagion and revels in the boom-boom-bippity-boom optimism of the rock-and-roll era — Happy days are here again and will forever remain!

In over thirty years of reading *Archie's* I have seen very little change in the format — except perhaps a token salute to the political correctness of the Eighties with the inclusion of people of colour. Now we can see at least one African-American girl going to Riverdale High with Betty and Veronica, and one African-American boy pitching ball with Archie and Jughead, and there is even one African-American coach. But where, I ask, are the Chicanos and the Native Americans and the Asian-Americans? I still read *Archie's* occasionally when I buy the double digest for my daughter or for her friends or for my adoring nephew who one day said to me, "Who do you think you are? Veronica Lodge?" when I openly declared that I wasn't going to wear this sari because I had seen another woman standing outside the British Council Library wearing the same sari. The twelve-year-old's sharp, sarcastic, accusative tone stopped me dead in my tracks for a full minute. It forced me to re-think my po-

sition, it made me reassess my values. I have kept the sari, and I do wear it occasionally.

I confess that my simple pleasure in reading *Archie's* today is somewhat complicated by my quasi-feminist sympathies. I look at freckle-faced Archie and I shudder at his hectic, exhausting amatory overtures to both the angelic blonde and the voluptuous brunette, and I wonder whether, as a baby, he was breast-fed or bottle-fed. I look at my first love Jughead, the laid-back existentialist philosopher, and I think, "There is more to this cat-and-mouse-game between him and Big Ethel than meets the eye. Could Jughead's strategic concealment of his person in garbage can be re-interpreted as representing the male fear of castration?" I look at the dumb Neanderthal Moose, and I think, "What does attractive, intelligent Midge see in him — the body beautiful?" It's not enough, of course. Midge dates slick Reggie often enough on the sly to undercut her apparent hero-worship of Moose.

Finally, I look at Miss Grundy, and while I applaud her wit and her resourcefulness and her formidable presence in the classroom, I cannot help but wonder at her single status. Was it a choice, freely made? Or was it a condition forced upon her by some past betrayal? Surely, I think, with her interesting personality, she would have had some suitors. And then I look again and I see her straight, thirteen-year-old boy's figure, and I think "Of course, the male gaze. It never saw beyond the body, never saw the mind's beauty, never saw the inner light."

Today, as I gaze into cyberspace, I think, "There is hope for this land yet when I can get Garfield with my morning tea." Thankfully, at least one of our English dailies is giving me the opportunity to leave the house with a smile on my face. Garfield is one cool cat.

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reflections

Ted Hughes' Assia

by Salahuddin Akbar

"He wanted the seven treasures of Asia —

Skin, eyes, lips, blood, hair knotted roughly in seven different flags."

THE above lines from Folktales, a poem included in Ted Hughes' New Selected Poems (1995) — is not about Asia or Assia Minor but all about Assia Wevill.

When Ted and Sylvia put an advertisement to sublet their small flat in London — two couples arrived simultaneously. The advertisers befriended the Wevills. Ted and Sylvia subsequently invited them to Devon weekend. And in May 1962, kindled the fatal attraction. Sylvia sensed her womanly sixth sense well about erotic tension that was nascent and was destined to shape.

When Ted dedicated his book *Crow* in memory of Assia and Shura — there were hardly few to feel curious who they were.

Daughter of a German protestant mother and Russian Jew father, Assia Gutman was born in Berlin. Later they move in to Tel Aviv to flee the Nazis in late 1930s. Amazingly beautiful as she was Assia was equally egocentric stubborn. Their family got befriended with British soldier officers. Assia as a teenager enjoyed dancing in the British soldiers' club. With the idea of getting settled in London easily she made the move with a sergeant, got married in London only to emigrate to Canada where Assia studied literature at Vancouver University.

It was not unlikely she was soon to discover that she had felt insipid and bored with her little educated British husband. She was manipulative to him as she saw him as her passport for London. Assia at that time fell in love with a brilliant student Richard Lipsey there. She divorced her first husband and married Richard who is a respected economist now.

Being a student of literature Assia was giving a try to writing poetry. During those years Assia on a ship trip to London met a 19-year-old Canadian poet David Wevill who was her 10 years junior. The two literary spirits thus continued their affairs of heart for four years. Assia divorced Lipsey and married Wevill in 1960.

But within a couple of years Assia already started feeling her passion for Wevill no more burning like before. It was cooling down. Despite her definite feeling inside her she came down with sense of insecurity to stay single. So in all her three marriages, she seemed to

Six years after the suicide of his wife Sylvia, Ted had to confront another tragedy when his mistress took the same decision. Preoccupied by a phone quarrel with Ted, Assia drags the bed into the kitchen, dissolved sleeping pills in a glass of water and gave the drink to her daughter Share, gulped the rest herself, turned on the gas stove, got into the bed with Share and cradled her in her arms. Together, they said goodbye to this tragic world. Sylvia's last maternal act — leaving milk and bread for her children, before gassing herself contrasts Assia's apparent heartlessness in taking her daughter's life along with her own. But Assia could be misconstrued. She did everything to ensure her loving daughter's safety and future. She appointed her sister as Shura's legal guardian after having felt literally suicidal.

have the next husband in line. Though society frowns people like Assia yet it is better than those people who have no compatibility at all in their conjugal lives — who inevitably split up and are forced to reconcile shamelessly — just for the sake of society; thus not only deceiving their social acquaintances but also their individual entity. May be it is okay for others but not for the reconciling couples — observe some critics. This paradox finds echoes in poet Stephen Spender:

Better in death to know
The happiness we loose
Than die in life in meaningless
Misery of those
Who lie beside chosen
Companions they never choose.

However Assia's search for Mr. Right ended when she happened to meet Ted Hughes. She was madly in love with him. She found the great love of her life and had her eyes for no one since. Love at first sight also went well with Ted. He fell in love with Assia Wevill at first sight when she and her husband Wevill came to rent Ted's house. 'Birthday Letters' was Ted's last best selling book which was published quite a few months before his death last year. 'Dreamers' is the only poem about Assia in this book

where Ted describes Assia's first visit

"She sat there, in her soot-wet macara
In flame-orange skills, in gold
bracelets,
Slightly filling with erotic mystery —
A German/Russian Israeli with the
gaze of a demon
Between curtains of black Mongolia
hair..."

At 31 Ted felt tremendously attracted to that many splendid beauty of 34 years old Assia. — a truly sensuous and voluptuous woman. Interestingly Sylvia's father was German while Assia's mother was German. Ted was known to have genuine interest in Hebrew and Jewish mysticism and history. Naturally he was sympathetic to Assia's sense of persecution as a Jew.

Even before the arrival of Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath was already accusing Ted Hughes of flirting with other women. Sylvia had a sneaking suspicion. Though she could not get Ted and Assia in uncompromising position yet her anxiety turned unbearable. Assia and her husband Wevill had to cut short their stay.

But love was on their way. Sylvia developed paranoid jealousy believing it well that Ted was a womaniser. When Ted was in London doing a programme for BBC, Assia was working as a copy writer in an advertising firm and they used to see each other regularly. At times Sylvia burned Ted's letters and poems and threw him out of the house, bluntly informed Mr. Wevill of his wife's adultery.

Ted had a magical charm and women fell for him easily — rather sometimes they would take the lead in taking initiatives. Ironically the same fear and anxiety repeated itself in Assia too! If she goes out for a visit, Ted will find someone else, he would go with other women — that was the case of Assia's being afraid to Ted also. But went there more of it. A strikingly beautiful Assia did envy Sylvia of her talent and life. But when Assia won him over Sylvia felt utterly obsessed with a sense of defeatism. She gassed herself in one February of 1963 — thus tendered a resignation from the cruel world.

Assia now began shuttling between

her former and new life. While still married to Wevill, she conceived Ted's child and at 38 gave birth to a baby daughter in 1965. The baby was nick named Shura. Wevill gave her his name. Assia and Wevill divorced. David Wevill is now a professor of English in A Texas University. He remarried and had three children.

Ted found his life not in conformity with harmony either. Ted and Assia loved passionately, could not live without one another but quarrelled many a times with separation and reconciliations. Ted encouraged Assia in her literary aspiration. He helped her doing translation works as he had helped Sylvia in her writing too. Assia felt not accepted as an artist of merit as equal in Ted's circles. She turned lackadaisical in everything that used to interest and inspire her, even to her loving daughter Shura. Ted was disillusioned with Assia. She had to lunch with Shura after wait for Ted who used to eat with his father alone. She felt there was no one to care for around her.

Six years after the suicide of his wife Sylvia, Ted had to confront another tragedy when his mistress took the same decision. Preoccupied by a phone quarrel with Ted, Assia drags the bed into the kitchen, dissolved sleeping pills in a glass of water and gave the drink to her daughter Share, gulped the rest herself, turned on the gas stove, got into the bed with Share and cradled her in her arms. Together, they said goodbye to this tragic world. Sylvia's last maternal act — leaving milk and bread for her children, before gassing herself contrasts Assia's apparent heartlessness in taking her daughter's life along with her own. But Assia could be misconstrued. She did everything to ensure her loving daughter's safety and future. She appointed her sister as Shura's le-

gal guardian after having felt literally suicidal. She bequeathed all her possessions to Shura with whom she lived in a rented flat, waiting for Ted's rare visits. She didn't want the baby to suffer by their instability of Ted's relationship. Often, she imagined Ted with other women. And there she was — Brenda Hedden, a married woman who was a frequent guest at their home. Assia found this ex-religious maniac with looks of an emaciated Marilyn Monroe — her real enemy.

Comparing with Assia's single and final attempt to suicide it is observed that Sylvia Plath had been on that suicidal track most of her life. She attempted her first suicide in 1953 — 3 years before her marriage. Throughout her life, she attempted to maintain a facade of popularity and easy achievement. Her autobiographical novel 'The Bell Jar' published under a pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963 the year she committed suicide. The book chartered Sylvia's earlier descent into madness in the early 50s.

For 30 years Ted Hughes remained both one of Britain's greatest writers and one of its most reviled. The suicides of the two women who loved him passionately brought fierce debate. Particularly among the critics, awarding credit and apportioning blame. Critics considered Sylvia to be a ruined genius. Surprisingly Sylvia was a broken-hearted too during her early acquaintance with Ted. Sylvia went to Paris soon after she met Ted, to see her boyfriend, Richard Sasson. But by the time she arrived, Sasson had gone. When she returned to London, she began her affair with Ted.

Surprisingly Ted's 'Birthday Letters' which he dedicated to his children Frieda and Nicholas from his first wife Sylvia, reveals his own story of mar-

riage to her — his whole heart in such a way that he never did before. The book is narrative which takes the poet from his first sight of his future wife — in a photograph — to the time of mourning and reflection that followed her death.

Assia completed the translation of an Israeli Playwright Eda Zorit, a close friend then living in London, days before her suicide. The play 'Last Game' was about a 40-year old woman deserted by her husband. The play ends with the heroine standing by an open window, hesitating whether to make the move and throw herself down. Assia was very eager to translate it.

A woman must be full of wrath at a man, too choose such a revenge of killing herself then murdering her child. But why she acted so could be the reason that she loved her daughter so much that she did not want to leave her at the mercy of a step mother. The intensity of a guilt consciousness that stabbed Ted — only he knew it though he later said he would have married Assia if he had known how distressed she was! And the following Ted married his friend's daughter Carol Orchard, a beautiful nurse 20 years his junior. In contrast Assia divorced her husband to marry Ted. But she could not get herself married. Like a passionate lover she went down life's lonesome highway passing through the vicissitudes of love. The most lovers do. Their moves no measured — passions not controlled. They get carried away only to reach the other side of life failing to hold on tight to the persons they believe to be right for them.

The fulfilling agents completed Assia's cycle of fate. They say life begins at 40. Especially the women in their 40s are compared to America — breathtakingly beautiful, with their resources fully explored. But at 42, Assia volunteered to slip into death in 1969.

The newly-wed Teds later travelled to Assia's homeland Israel. Ted packed Assia and Shura's belongings in crates and shipped them out to Assia's sister in Canada. But it seemed Assia was not left to rest in peace even after her death — nature joined the conspiracy against her. The vessel sank with all its cargo.

However, miraculously the crates resurfaced and were recovered after eight months. The fate did not wanting the two of them to disappear completely from the face of the earth.

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