

# For the love & confusion over Tintin, a very European hero



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From the very moment I took it on, it felt like a Herculean task. To bring back a relic of the past, to clean off the dust from an unused side of the bookshelf and reread Tintin in the wake of the boyish reporter turning 90. More often than not, books and movies I loved as a child have not stood the test of time—whether that is because of changing taste in literature or how they were riddled with problematic issues which are more clearly evident to a politically aware adult, I am not sure.

With Tintin, I felt fairly confident. Who does not love Tintin, right? Fantastic tales of adventure in far off lands, with beautiful, colourful imagery that was loved and approved by all. Even parents threw their weight behind Tintin as 'appropriate reading'—The adventures of the adolescent Belgian reporter with his dog Snowy in tow is something that we all knew very well.

This widespread appreciation for a relatively ordinary comic character—well ahead of the current public fascination for superhero epics—might seem odd to people in many parts of the world. Prior to the animated movie (directed by Steven Spielberg), the Belgian reporter was virtually unknown in places like the US, so much so that the promotional paraphernalia had to carry a sub-title introducing Tintin to moviegoers. Even current generations of Belgians are indifferent to Tintin as a pop-culture phenomenon, much less carry a strong opinion on the problematic elements within its 24 distinct storylines. But generations of post-colonial Bangladeshis (Tintin was available both in Bangla and English, among 70 other languages) have practically grown up on a pre-dominantly British/European literature diet, with Tintin being an easy entry-point for many.

Childhood heroes often have their names dragged through the mud. Some for good reason too. It has happened to quite a few: Enid Blyton's books, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and even *The Simpsons*.

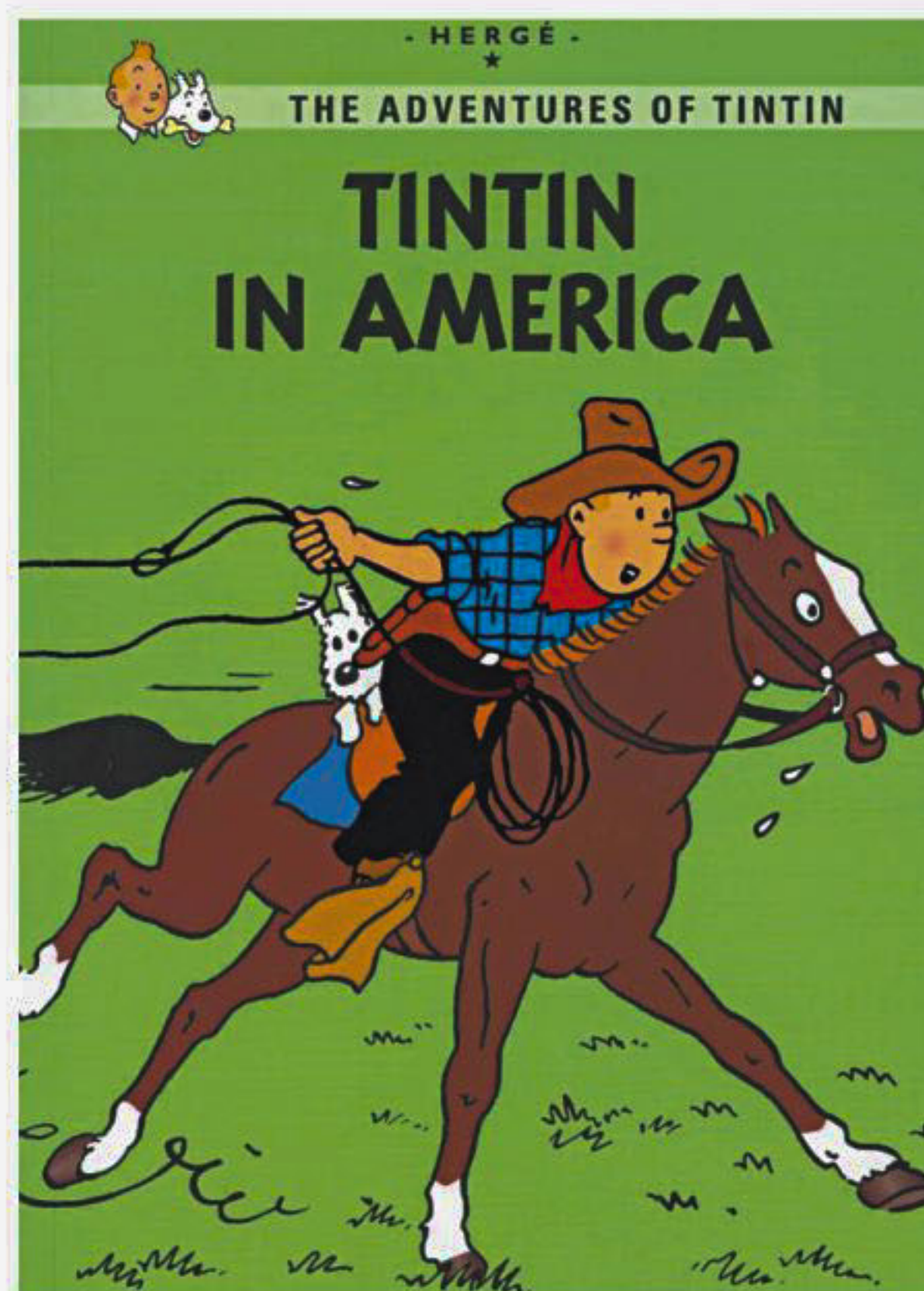
That many of Tintin's narratives were often one dimensional is a perspective that dawns only to those willing to dig deeper. His creator Georges Remi, known by his pen name Hergé, had his own sociopolitical agenda to push and he sometimes pushed it through the narratives in his work. By now, it is a well-known fact that Tintin's creator himself was a young man who had never left Europe when he started drawing comic strips for *Le Petit Vingtième*, a Belgian Catholic periodical, in 1929.

Hergé himself admitted that Tintin started as a conservative, right-wing character, according to earlier articles published in various newspapers. That is

understandable, because Hergé's editor until 1933, when the first Tintin stories were written, was Abbé Norbert Wallez, a known right-wing priest-journalist who had an immense influence on him. The first three serialisations—*Tintin in the Land of the Soviets*, *Tintin in the Congo* and *Tintin in America*—were later admitted to be conservative propaganda aimed at shaping the political outlook of children. The anti-communist, pro-colonial, anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in the first three books makes for a very, very strange read now.

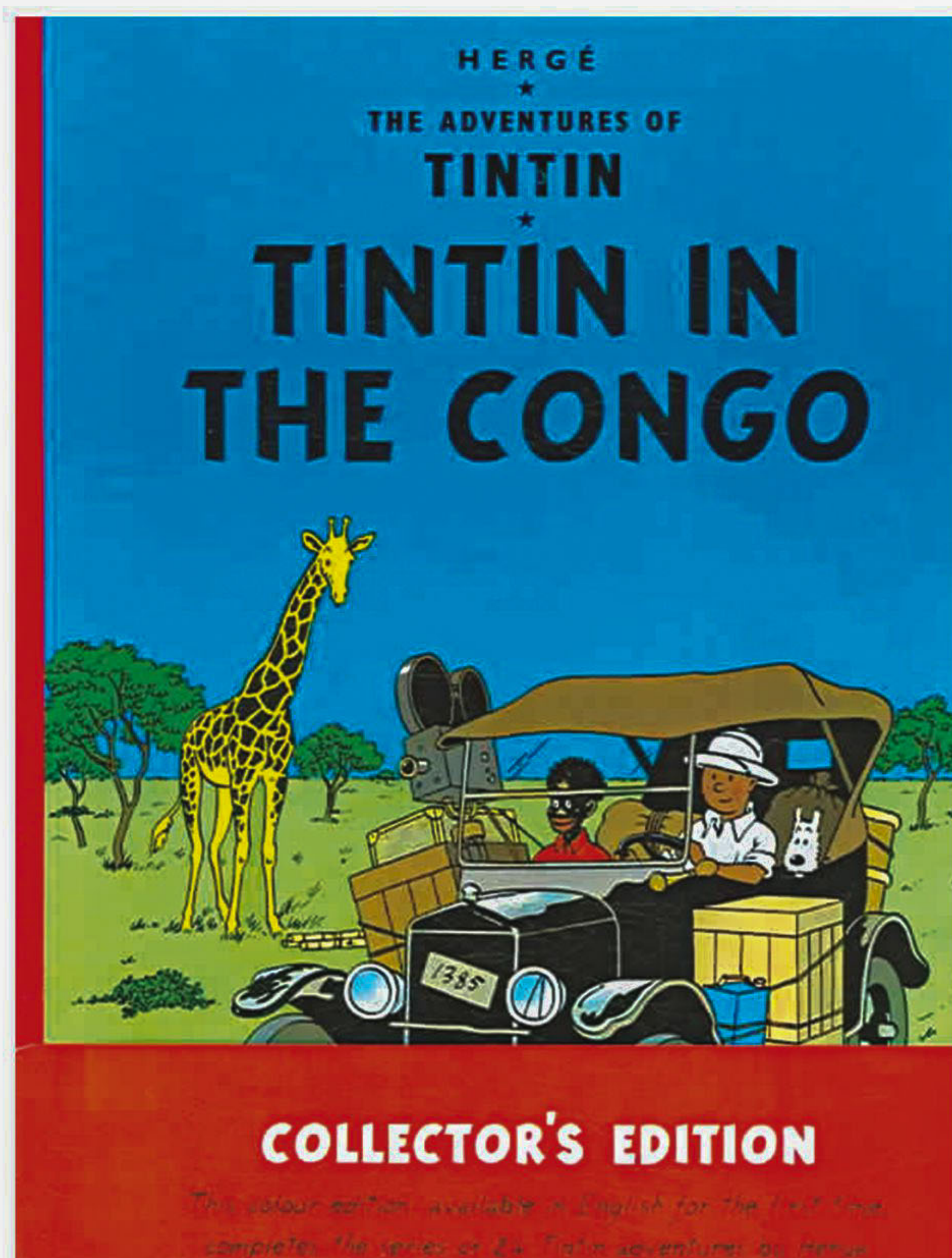
There were other problems associated with Tintin's character in the early days—not just for racism but for Tintin's rather dramatic depopulation of the local wildlife, be it accidentally gunning down more than a dozen antelope, shooting a chimp so he can don its skin as a costume, or using dynamite to dispatch a rhinoceros.

In fact, the boyish reporter's entire stint in the Congo was just a messy business that reinforced Belgian colonial authority and upheld the Christian, colonial,



monarchist view of their African colonies being populated by "savages". Even *The Economist* has been critical of Tintin's depiction as a white man on a mission to "civilise" the natives: "Its Africans are crude caricatures: child-men with wide eyes and bloated lips who prostrate themselves before Tintin (as well as Snowy his dog), after he shows off such magic as an electromagnet, or quinine pills for malaria." It was first published first in 1930—just a year after *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets*—and stirred up so much controversy, they weren't published in English till decades later.

It would be unfair to hold the whole



series to the standards of the first three books. With the world thrown into disarray in the Second World War, conservative European viewpoints started to lose out in favour. While there wasn't a dramatic shift in the way Tintin was portrayed, there was a decided toning down of the conservative ideologies expressed in Hergé's post-war work.

Minus the blatant racism in some instances, there was the anti-racism that was portrayed in the other books, which is also typical of Hergé's time and its racial hierarchies. In many of the books, Tintin is seen working against Imperial Japan and European dictatorships and fights slavers. Essentially, he comforts the afflicted, which can be likened to the white man's guilt. *The Guardian* in one article wrote, "The anti-racist effort in the adventures of Tintin is portrayed as a sort of civilisatory white man's burden—a knightly, gentlemanly missionary activity."

It was also bizarre that wherever he went, Tintin would dress in the local "attire". In America, Tintin looks like a cowboy, while donning a Lawrence of Arabia-esque turban for his adventures in a fictional representation of the Middle East. If he came to Bangladesh and chose simply to dress in a *lungi* and *gamcha*, would that be an accurate representation of what we dress like? The answer is an obvious one: No. But then it has to be acknowledged that these narratives have racial implications or instances of cultural appropriation in the present day but were completely

acceptable during Hergé's time.

On a superficial level, Hergé, essentially aimed to provide his readers with a multi-dimensional reading adventure, trotting the globe and solving mysteries. But through his travels around Asia, especially *In Land of the Black Gold*, you see a different Tintin than the one you are familiar with in the West, and his interaction with the people of the Middle East all lend themselves to an Orientalist reading. In the book, Tintin is the foreign, Western mediator who helps the Emir to solve issues he was having with an oil company in his country, perpetuating the imperialistic notion that a Western influence is required to dominate, restructure, and have authority over the Orient.

As I sit and write this piece inside a newsroom, I also think back to how easy it was for me to forget that Tintin was actually a reporter. There was no hurry to file reports and he could travel the world at the hint of a story (where did he manage the budget!): two things that I rarely get the luxury of.

This whole run down the memory lane has convinced me one thing, I would like to keep Tintin in the past, as a loved memory of the boyish reporter who brought joy to countless generations. And one who if nothing else, instilled in us a desire to travel, from the Arabian Desert to the Tibetan Highlands. This year, Tintin's world turned 90, I would very much like to keep him safely tucked away in the good old days.