

Ending Wellesley

Cartoon Rules

Dan Nadel

Three Rocks:
The Story of Ernie Bushmiller,
the Man Who Created Nancy

by Bill Griffith.
Abrams ComicArts, 265 pp., \$24.99

As a boy growing up in the postwar American ur-suburb of Levittown, Long Island, the cartoonist Bill Griffith learned to read through Ernie Bushmiller's sublimely absurd and gloriously minimal *Nancy* comic strip, which ran in the daily newspaper alongside strips like *Blondie*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Terry and the Pirates*, tickling readers across the country seven days a week. *Nancy's* main characters included the titular mischievous girl, her aunt Fritzi, and her pal Sluggo; its perfectly generic fences and houses seemed to resemble the view outside Griffith's window. The strip was Bushmiller's decades-long exercise in joke construction, accomplished with a rigorous set of rules and an absurd imagination. As Griffith writes in *Three Rocks*, his graphic biography of Bushmiller, "*Nancy* doesn't tell you what it's like to be a child. *Nancy* tells you what it's like to be a comic strip."

Bushmiller was born in 1905 to working-class German and Northern Irish immigrant parents in the South Bronx and dropped out of high school at fourteen to work for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Back in 1919 daily cartoonists worked in a bullpen, and aspirants like Bushmiller could watch masters including H.T. Webster, Rudolph Dirks, and his soon-to-be friend Milt Gross drawing their strips every day. The teenager and his set erased pencil lines, added lettering, and performed other menial tasks. Soon Bushmiller was promoted to ruling the grids for crossword puzzles, waiting for a chance to try out his own comic strip.

Griffith was born in 1944. In the 1960s, after attending art school at the Pratt Institute, he discovered underground newspapers and the far-out comics of his generation and soon began publishing underground comic books that probed the genre's tropes. Meanwhile, *Nancy* became the illustration for the definition of "comic strip" in the 1973 edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary*. It ran in more than eight hundred newspapers, and the character had been adopted as a po-faced queer icon by Joe Brainard, who disassembled and reassembled its visual elements in drawings and narratives, and Andy Warhol, who appropriated a panel for one of his first Pop canvases.



A page from Bill Griffith's *Three Rocks*

By the time Bushmiller died in 1982, Griffith had coedited (with Art Spiegelman) the forward-thinking underground anthology *Arcade*, which included work by Robert Crumb, Diane Noomin, Aline Kominsky, and Justin Green. He was also drawing, in a style reminiscent of the Depression-era artist Reginald Marsh, the weekly comic strip *Zippy*, featuring a naif called Zippy the Pinhead, whose catchphrase—"Are we having fun yet?"—is both a wish and a quandary. Through this endlessly curious character, alongside the cartoonist's own stand-in, Griffy, and others, Griffith has examined contemporary social phenomena, interrogating philosophy, punk rock, nostalgia, collect-

ing, cuteness, manufacturing, cats, and comics itself—including *Nancy*.

After appearing in alternative weekly papers for nearly a decade, in 1986 *Zippy* jumped to mainstream national newspaper syndication. This move was unique among cartoonists of Griffith's cohort and uniquely appropriate, affording him a seat within the media machine he critiques. The strip remains in about one hundred newspapers, including *The Washington Post*.

Every cartoonist has a guiding obsession. Griffith's is decoding the cultural abundance that imprints upon his consciousness every day. Bushmill-

er's was constructing the perfect gag. He built *Nancy* from back to front, starting with the punch line—known as "the snapper"—and then working his way back to the beginning by asking himself, "Now how do I get there?" It was all about the joke. The comic book artist Wallace Wood once said, "It's harder to not read *Nancy* than to read *Nancy*." Griffith feels similarly:

With other comics, my critical eye is always in gear... but not with *Nancy*... not with *Nancy*. Never with *Nancy*. I can feel the endorphins flowing, *Nancy* makes me happy, not from the gags, but from the perfect expression of what comics are. And after I'm amused, I'm amazed. *Little Nemo* may be breathtaking, *Pogo* may be witty, *Crumb* may be brilliant, but *Nancy* is... perfection.

Three Rocks is a portrait of an artist obsessed with the formal mechanics of the comic strip. Griffith introduces us to Bushmiller in his studio at the Midtown Manhattan *Daily News* building in 1949, hunched over a board, only part of which has been filled in: "I've got the last panel... Sluggo holding a giant water pistol... /... Now what would *Nancy* have to do to make that happen?" Bushmiller's solution is to start the strip with *Nancy* attempting to toss the water pistol to Sluggo; it lands on the street, just in front of a steamroller. Next we see Sluggo holding the water pistol, which is now as big as him, the vehicle having flattened and thus enlarged it. The entire scenario is only possible through cartoon logic: steamrollers don't suddenly materialize on quiet streets; toys don't flatten like dough underneath a rolling pin, they break. The strip—like all *Nancy* installments—is drawn with rigorously clean and quiet precision, signaling nothing out of the ordinary. Sluggo is surprised but not disoriented. After all, this is a comic strip. Why can't an object get pancaked?

The *Nancy* world is always governed by Bushmiller's private comedic rules: three rocks are funnier than two; *Nancy's* hair never has fewer than 69 or more than 107 spikes; the scenery and the many objects with which the characters interact must be hand-drawn but always generic—fences, storefronts, doors remain the same, never a line out of place. (They could be pulled from a Sears, Roebuck catalog, and often

were.) While we immediately recognize everything in any given panel, there is no concession to realism. This is the realm of the icon and the pictograph.

Why are three rocks funnier than two—or four? Because odd numbers are intrinsically funnier than even numbers, and a grouping of three rocks, which Bushmiller often included in his *Nancy* panels, creates an uncluttered graphic balance—more than three and the mass becomes a distraction. This was the kind of problem Bushmiller was interested in rather than plot, character, or emotion. His obsession with the formal qualities of comic strips allowed him to make *Nancy* aware that it's a comic strip, just as Nancy is aware that she's a character in it: she sees her own merchandising; she might snip an ink border to let in some fresh air or lift a panel corner to sweep some dust.

Griffith adopts a similar approach in his book. As the opening scene continues over several pages, we see Bushmiller approve merchandise, talk to his agent, speak to a journalist, and develop more gags. His wife, Abby, calls to ask him to buy a meat grinder on the way home. As he takes his seat on the subway at the end of the day, an image of the machine as Bushmiller drew it for his strip appears seamlessly collaged into a thought balloon above his head. He is so focused on its gag potential that he forgets the actual errand. Waking life is here quite literally overtaken by the comic strip, as it is in the book itself, which also operates with its own cartoon logic.

After this introductory vignette, Griffith brings us back to the South Bronx of Bushmiller's youth, and then follows his life in roughly chronological order, with digressions on topics ranging from a *Nancy* strip about her own visual design—drawn by Bushmiller with dialogue supplied by Griffith—to an examination of the sexual politics of *Fritzi Ritz*, the strip out of which *Nancy* was born. Throughout the book Griffith signals each geographic and thematic shift through panels originally drawn by Bushmiller to which he has added new text. Every appearance of a *Nancy* character is a clipping from an actual strip. This solidifies Griffith's implicit argument that the graphic zone of *Nancy* is as real as the people and places of Bushmiller's daily life. In its declarative diversity of approaches, *Three Rocks* tells us what it's like to be a graphic biography about a self-aware comic strip.

Three Rocks is Griffith's third non-fiction book, with a fourth—about his great-grandfather, the nineteenth-century photographer William Henry Jackson—on the way. Having spent decades commenting on the terrain around him in his comic strips, over the past several years Griffith has been using the book form to delineate the genetic and cultural strands from which he emerged. His first book, *Invisible Ink* (2015), chronicles his mother's affair with the cartoonist, novelist, and raconteur Lawrence Lariar, in the process mapping the emotional world of postwar suburban America and the business of humor. His second, *Nobody's Fool* (2019), is the story of Zippy's visual inspiration, a real-life circus performer named Schlitzie who was born with microcephaly and appeared in Tod Browning's film *Freaks* (1932),

as well as a meditation on influence, disease, and celebrity.

The new volume examines Griffith's primary creative influence—Bushmiller—and through him the business and art of the medium to which Griffith has devoted his life. Griffith's drawings are accurate but inviting, easygoing but carefully composed, and they're particularly good at conveying body language, as well as the atmospheres of his various settings—especially the rooms of the *New York World*.

Bushmiller's early apprenticeship and success are among the most vivid passages in the book. Aside from learning the trade and catching the gossip, hanging around the newspaper's bullpen, as Bushmiller did, meant that jobs might land with whoever had a free hand. Sometimes it was an old pro on the skids, but usually it was one of the copyboys hoping for a stable gig.

Created in 1922, Larry Whittington's *Fritzi Ritz* was a popular soap opera comic strip about a ditzzy flapper falling into romance and adventure. It was also, like all strips at the time, owned by the newspaper, not its creator. When Whittington was lured to the Hearst papers in 1925, the *World* needed a new artist for *Fritzi*. Bushmiller, whom Whittington had quietly been training, got the job, making him, at age nineteen, the youngest cartoonist to write and draw a syndicated strip.

At that moment, having inherited someone else's creation, Bushmiller likely intuited that cartoon characters are autonomous: they do not have an allegiance to their creator, nor to anything aside from the comic strip itself. *Fritzi* became Bushmiller's. He kept the soap opera stories going for a long while, but by 1933, the Depression had rendered the flapper irrelevant. Readers weren't so interested in frivolous love stories and dancehall high jinks.

Fritzi Ritz was still a beloved comic strip appearing in hundreds of newspapers. It was enormously difficult to introduce a new strip to papers and readers, so Bushmiller knew he had to keep *Fritzi* alive while slowly and subtly changing its content. He did this by giving *Fritzi* a niece named Nancy, who at first was a plucky and adventurous sidekick and then gradually took center stage, becoming a reader favorite. Five years later Sluggo (named for a bully of Bushmiller's Bronx youth) appeared, and the new core cast was complete. In June 1938 the strip was retitled *Nancy*, and by the end of the 1940s it was in a groove, running in 450 papers with a total circulation of 21 million copies.

Bushmiller married another Bronx native, Abby Bohnet, in 1930. Bohnet, then working at Metropolitan Life, was known for being witty and a bit of a dreamer. The couple were devoted to each other and eventually to *Nancy*. Their life, first in the Bronx and then for decades in Stamford, Connecticut, was entirely bound to the strip.

In his spacious home studio Bushmiller set up four drawing tables so that he could create six daily strips at once, working between Sunday and Tuesday evenings. Wednesdays and Thursdays were off, but Fridays and Saturdays were dedicated to producing the larger Sunday strip. It was a seventy-hour workweek coming up with all those kickers: Nancy is peacefully dreaming of a log being sawed; half of it breaks off with

a "CRASH." The snapper: Nancy opens her eyes, peeved ("That always wakes me up"). Nancy gets separated from Aunt Fritzi in a train station. The snapper: Nancy seated expressionless among suitcases and packages on a shelf in the lost property room.

And on and on. *Nancy* was Bushmiller and Bushmiller *Nancy* for nearly fifty years. The only children in the house were drawn in ink; the cartoonist didn't much like being around human kids. Too much noise, not enough engineering. Bushmiller liked Jackie Gleason, Joe Franklin, Diego Velázquez, Thomas Wolfe, Fats Waller, S. J. Perelman, lamb loin chop, and Kent cigarettes. At his earning peak, he made \$15,000 weekly from *Nancy*.

Griffith takes inspiration from his subject's work, explaining Bushmiller's sensibility through a handful of fictional sequences occurring in a world that is both "Griffy" and *Nancy*. A young Lawrence Lariar, one day to be an imagined father figure to Griffith, appears as an aspiring cartoonist asking advice of Bushmiller at a bar; their dialogue contains details about Bushmiller's working process and philosophy of humor and accurately summarizes a publishing world in which cartoonists were famous enough to be known but far enough down the culture ladder to be approachable.

In another invented vignette, Bushmiller—who did in fact go to Los Angeles to write sight gags for the comedian and filmmaker Harold Lloyd—meets and collaborates with the *Krazy Kat* cartoonist George Herriman. Through this imagined comic strip duet, Griffith argues that the formulaic can be as personal as the improvisational. Bushmiller's measured world is as distinct as Herriman's romantic ink flourishes: just as no one else could draw a deliciously scrappy Herriman brick, no one else can quite match a precision-designed Bushmiller boulder.

In another part of the book we enter an imaginary "Bushmiller Museum of Comic Art in Stamford, Connecticut." There Griffy, like a good docent, takes us through galleries of ideas: How about a two-person project about Bushmiller and Edward Hopper? The painter's silent images of lone figures in empty expanses and the cartoonist's icy horizontal spaces inhabited by a single figure and blankly anonymous furniture have a shared melancholy. Both artists employ a pregnant atmosphere, though of course one resolves with a guffaw and the other hangs forever in a pool of moonlight.

In a multilayered meditation on Bushmiller's reception by the mid-century intelligentsia, Griffith draws a one-and-a-half-page jive session between two beatniks about the existential nature of *Nancy*. The pop culture craze for the Beats was fertile ground for Bushmiller himself in numerous strips well into the early 1970s. John Stanley, the cartoonist who made the comic book *Little Lulu* a classic of concision and irony, also drew a licensed comic book version of *Nancy* and a beatnik-filled hoot of a comic book called *Kookie*, on which Griffith modeled his riff. This passage flows into a reprinting of the brilliant (and often taken as factual, though it is fiction, written by A. S. Hamrah in 1999) correspondence between Bushmiller and Samuel Beckett in which the writer pitches ideas to the cartoonist. These elucidate the particularly personal na-

ture of the rules of the strip and are emblematic of the fascination it held for all kinds of artists. The imagined Beckett: "I've always found a carrot funnier than a banana, but that may be the difference between the Old world and the New."

Nancy has inspired literary and artistic quests and commentary for decades. In 1944 the critic Manny Farber, edging toward formulating his idea of "termite" versus "white elephant" art, praised its unsentimental focus on the gag; the cartoonists and *Nancy* scholars Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden use a single daily strip to explain the mechanics and history of the medium in their brilliant 2017 book, *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels*. And a new anthology of Bushmiller's *Nancy* will be published in May. Yet despite an adoring fan base, as Griffith's story edges into the 1960s, Ernie and Abby Bushmiller are mostly alone. Their relative isolation in Stamford was both temperamental and circumstantial. The bullpens were done, the old pals were dying off, and the comics page itself was shrinking. *Nancy*, being a graphic symbol that even the staunchest minimalist could appreciate, remained legible, and in 1970s assistants were hired to help the aging master keep the gags coming.

Three Rocks concludes with two reveries. First Bushmiller dreams of his characters, speaks to himself, and quietly dies in the easy chair that held his last days; on a nearby lectern *The American Heritage Dictionary* is opened to the definition of his profession, illustrated by his only offspring. Then, in the lengthy and moving epilogue, Griffy emerges into a snowy day on his way to the "United Features Retirement Facility No. 34," just behind the Museum. There he finds an aging Nancy.

Her inner life, we learn, is complicated. She misses Sluggo—he disappeared in 1982. She is bespectacled and wrinkled but behaves characteristically by walking around all four sides of the panel. Soon Griffy meets an aged, white-bearded Sluggo; backgrounds change from panel to panel; we are in a collective cartoon consciousness. Griffy the character is exploring a situation that Griffith the author, like Bushmiller before him, has interrogated: What happens to characters when their creators are gone? Do they age and become forgetful in a netherworld? The sensibility made by fusing artist and character dissipates, even as the property lives on.

Nancy continues today in the care of the young pseudonymous cartoonist Olivia Jaimes, but it is not Bushmiller's *Nancy*. Only his hand could have made that version from 1938 to 1982, just as only Griffith's hand could make his *Zippy*. *Three Rocks*, for all its meta layering and rich historical narratives, is ultimately an ode to the specificity of an artist, his medium, and their creation. At the end of this surprisingly tender book, Nancy and Sluggo are pulled together as though magnetized and resume their classic Bushmiller forms. They settle down to sleep and, as they so often did, to dream. It may be the snapper to the book. Perhaps they'll meet their maker. ●

*Ernie Bushmiller, *Nancy and Sluggo's Guide to Life: Comics About Money, Food, and Other Essentials*, with a foreword by Denis Kitchen (New York Review Comics, 2024).