

Shoemaker

Photos by Joel Sartore



Why not? says Omaha cartoonist

Howard Shoemaker is a very funny man . . . sometimes. That humor is to be expected, of course. That's how he makes his living — creating rib-ticking cartoons that pinpoint the humor in everyday situations. His vignettes are funny. Some of the nation's top magazine editors agree on that.

So there's little wonder that a few snickers spill into Shoemaker's daily life. He's a funny guy . . . sometimes.

And sometimes he's not. Sometimes he's quiet and thoughtful, reflecting on life's puzzles and confusion. That's Howard Shoemaker for you. Complex.

Mostly, of course, he's funny, viewing life from a slightly different stance. An oblique look is the secret to cartooning, he says.

"Just twist it just a little bit," he says, tipping his teacup on the edge of the long, wide coffee table. "It isn't here (on the table) or it isn't on the floor. It's right in between . . . right at that moment."

Shoemaker credits his Council Bluffs, Iowa, upbringing for his sense of humor. He and his family lived across the alley from a mental institution and down the street from a home for student nurses.

"I've always used that (the mental institution) as one of the reasons my work is a little warped," he says.

Shoemaker says he never thought about becoming a cartoonist when he was a boy. "We were too busy looking in the windows at the nurses' home." How old was he then? "Oh, 27, 28," he says with a deep laugh.

Shoemaker says he and his younger brother and sister learned to pay attention to what was going on around them.

The funny things in life last only seconds, Shoemaker says. To enjoy them, you must spot them quickly.

Most of the 53-year-old cartoonist's work focuses on people and funny things he sees on neighborhood walks with Janice, his wife of 32 years.

"I just have a different outlook, I think, on what life is. I don't believe in people taking themselves too seriously. There are human foibles inside us all."

Shoemaker's cartoons are his way of bringing people closer to reality. He says people sometimes forget how inconsequential their lives are. Two newspaper clippings taped to the yellow walls of his second-floor "garrett" studio are reminders of the vastness of time and space.

The first article reads: "If the distance from earth to sun were downscaled to one inch, get this, the nearest star, Alpha Centauri still would be 4 1/3 miles down the pike."

A second article deals with time: "If you look at the earth's evolution on a time scale of one year, when do the dinosaurs show

up? Mid-December, and they died out the day after Christmas. The Ice Age ended a minute before midnight on Dec. 31, the Roman Empire lasted five seconds, the United States got started less than one second ago."

That's not something you'd expect to see on a Playboy cartoonist's wall.

Shoemaker also has drawn a time scale, from when earth formed to the present. The green line measures three or four feet along the wall. At the end of the scale, when mankind first walked the earth, the length should be only 1/50 of an inch.

People's lives are clearly insignificant when compared with such time and space, Shoemaker notes.

"Maybe that's why it ain't any big deal," he said, with emphasis. "We're not no big deal."

Despite his fascination with such information, Shoemaker doesn't have much confidence in organized education. He says education "always seemed like it bends things the wrong direction." Following a curriculum is important, but he thinks some people would be better off if they learned from experience rather than to rely on education.

Shoemaker acknowledges that "there are some holes" in his own work, "that education would have filled in."

"I just can't put my finger on it, but I know there are certain things that I get stuck on . . . and maybe having an academic approach to it might solve it."

He says he couldn't go back to school now, but he knows he would be further in his career if he had attended a German or French art school.

Art school was not a consideration for him because he more or less stumbled into the cartoon business.

Before beginning his career as a freelance cartoonist, Shoemaker worked at Omaha television stations KMTV and WOWT, Bozell and Jacobs advertising agency and Christensen and Kennedy animation studio. While busy at those jobs, he freelanced for American Greeting Card Co. in Cleveland for 13 years.

Something, he doesn't know what, compelled him to begin drawing cartoons while working at the ad agency. He started submitting cartoons to magazines, but everything was rejected. That is, until his friend and boss at the animation studio, Dennis Kennedy, took some drawings along on a trip to Chicago.

Kennedy went to the Playboy offices and handed the cartoons to one of the editors. The editor said "OK" and Shoemaker's career with Playboy took off.

Playboy published Shoemaker's first cartoon in August 1959. Since then, the magazine has published his work almost monthly. Road and Track readers have seen Shoemaker's single-frame drawings in every issue for the last 24 years.

His thoughts shift from their sojourn into the past and the

rocking chair creaks as he crooks his leg over the arm. He sits in the shadows. As he speaks, his nearly bald head turns toward the dim light from the window. He periodically gets up to turn up the furnace, saying he feels cold.

Shoemaker's trademark, his handlebar mustache, has been obscured slightly by a beard. He says he grew the beard to protest not having received a check. The check arrived, but the beard stayed. He'll shave it soon, he says, because everyone knew him by the mustache.

He makes few pretenses, clad in blue jeans rolled up at the hems, cowboy boots and an old checkered flannel shirt. He says he doesn't even own a three-piece suit.

Shoemaker liked the freedom his job offers him, but he adds that his time is still regimented and disciplined. He gets up every day about 7 or 7:30 a.m. and goes to a little coffeeshop near his home to read the morning paper. He walks his wife to the bus and then begins drawing about 9 a.m.

Shoemaker works until noon and then walks the 2 1/2 miles downtown to the Old Market. He visits his wife who works at a little speciality shop and talks to friends at the local bars until about 5 p.m. Then he walks home and goes back to the drawing board. "I work by myself up there in that room and the walls close in on me after a while. I gotta get out," he says. "There's just me and the cat here in the daytime. He doesn't converse very readily."

Shoemaker says his afternoon activities are due partly to his zodiac sign. "Most Sagittarians that I've ever met are always in the bar and they like to sit and talk all afternoon. That's definitely me," he says, laughing loudly.

Shoemaker well remembers one such afternoon. He was talking about his cartoons to a woman seated next to him at a bar. She told him she always had wanted a tattoo, but she wasn't sure she would like it. She asked him if he could draw a butterfly. He said yes. She asked if he would do it right there in the bar. He said yes again. Then she unbuttoned her blouse. She wanted the butterfly drawn on her left breast.

Shoemaker didn't hesitate a moment. He cupped her breast in his left hand and drew the butterfly with his right. The "tattoo artist" had drawn one wing and the body when he suddenly felt that something was wrong.

"I turned around and this guy who is about the size of Rimington (Dave Rimington, the 1982 Outland and Lombardi trophy winner) . . . is standin' there. And he says 'What in the hell are you doin'? That's my lady.' I thought 'oh, God, here it comes. He's gonna knock me out.' She talked him out of it."

Although that was probably the strangest thing that ever happened to Shoemaker, he has done a few other zany things.

He once attended a masquerade party dressed as the Red Baron,