

How to Read Nancy

"How to read Nancy?" you may sneer, "You might as well explain how to read a stop sign?" You're half right, but there's a lot more to Ernie Bushmiller's work than meets the eye. And, like a traffic sign, meeting the eye is largely what Nancy is all about. Before your inner traffic cop can step in and shout "STOP" the optic nerve has thoroughly transmitted the essence of Nancy to your cerebrum and chances are you've either chuckled, groaned, moved along to Dick Tracy or doubled over in arch hysterics. No other cartoonist worked with such consistent economy.

To say that Nancy is a simple gag strip about a simple-minded slot-nosed kid is to miss the point completely. Nancy only appears to be simple at a casual glance. Like architect Mies Van Der Rohe, the simplicity is a carefully designed function of a complex amalgam of formal rules laid out by the designer. To look at Bushmiller as an architect is entirely appropriate, for Nancy is, in a sense, a blue print for a comic strip. Walls, floors, rocks, trees, Ice-cream cones, motion lines, midgets and principals are carefully positioned with no need for further embellishment. And they are laid out with one purpose in mind - to get the gag across. Minimalist? Formalist? Structuralist? Cartoonist!

"Gag it down" was Bushmiller's off-spoken credo and the gag was the *raison d'être* of Nancy. Characterization, atmosphere, emotional depth, social comment, plot, internal consistency, and common sense are all merrily surrendered in Bushmiller's universe to the true function of a comic strip as he unrelentingly saw it: to provoke the "gag reflex" of his readership on a daily basis.

Nancy and her cohorts barely exist beyond the Microgram coda that Bushmiller has designed for each, and their "personalities" are easily summed up in a word or two (Nancy = cheeky imp, Slugger = Impoverished wiseguy loafer, Fritzi = adult authority figure, Rollo = rich, Spike = bully, etc.). The common quality that the cast all share (and undoubtedly an insight into Bushmiller's own mindset) is a keen adeptness at problem solving. As with Keaton, Messmer and Tate, objects are a rich source of gags for Bushmiller (he claimed the Sears-Roebuck catalog as a major source for inspiration). Various objects are introduced into the strip for the express purpose of creating or solving a state of imbalance. The characters' ingenuity in transforming these intrusions and recreating a balance defined the gag, sold the strip, and earned Bushmiller the dough to buy nice lawn furniture. Just what is the world that exists without these intrusions? Nonexistent, really, because Nancy's life is little more than thousands of strange, isolated events cropping up daily, and neatly overcome by Nancy, one of her peers, or the artist himself.

In the following strips a plunger is introduced into the works as a problem solving tool. These are a few of the infinite ways this single prop can be exploited for a gag.



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Ernie Bushmiller had the hand of an architect, the mind of a silent film comedian, and the soul of an accountant. His formulaic approach to humor beautifully revealed the essence of what a gag is all about - balance, symmetry, economy. His gags have the abstract feel of math and Nance was, in fact, a mini-algebra equation masquerading as a comic strip for close to 50 years.

To ask whether Nancy is really funny is again to miss the point. No matter how far Bushmiller reached to excite that "gag reflex" he could never gag it down all the way. Humor is subjective and a true common denominator cannot exist. Ernie Bushmiller, however, probably came closer than anyone in his one-man crusade to find it.

There is little that is beneath Bushmiller in his quest for a gag. A kind of sublime dumbness became Bushmiller's personal territory and he mined it brilliantly. (He drew Nancy, he once explained, for the "gum chewers".) Along with popular humorists Mack Sennett, Jules White, Tex Avery, Frank Tashlin and Jerry Lewis, Bushmiller realized that the gag knows no I.Q. and that the success or failure of a given gag relies much more on its own inner mechanizations than on the inherent sophistication of its premise. Visual puns, word puns, slapstick, misunderstanding, incongruity, and simple inversion were some of Bushmiller's routine gag techniques; they rarely failed him.

The mortar that held these gag bricks tight were basic, iconic, coin-of-the-realm truisms: An ice-cream cone is a child's best friend, school is a drag, bums are lazy, bullies are dumb, blondes are cute, salesmen travel door-to-door, little green men populate Mars and Modern Art is a madman's hoax. No one more fully exploited these popular conventions than Bushmiller and their encyclopedic accumulation, which shaped Nancy's universe, amounts to nothing less than a highly personal vision. Functionally, these banalities allowed the strips to be rapidly understood and quickly digested; they helped the gag go down faster, cleaner.

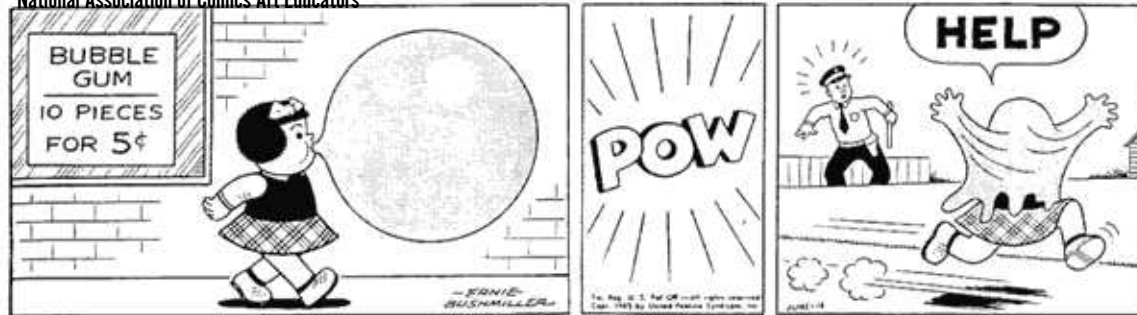
The following strips demonstrate some frequently used Bushmiller gag devices:



VISUAL PUN



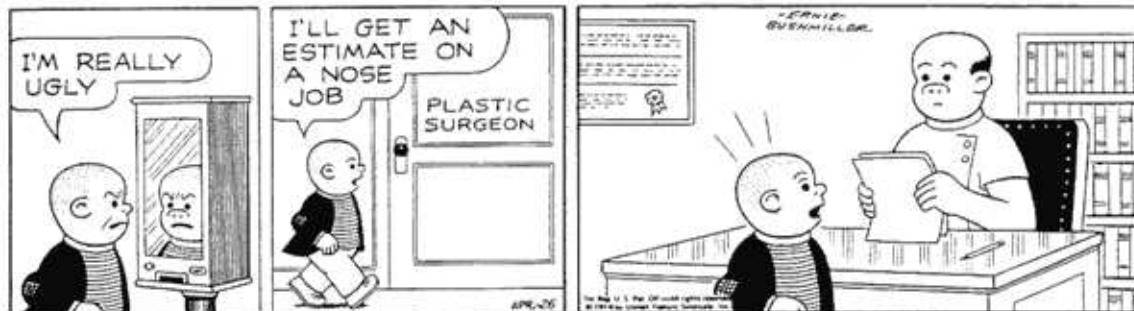
WORD PUN



SLAPSTICK



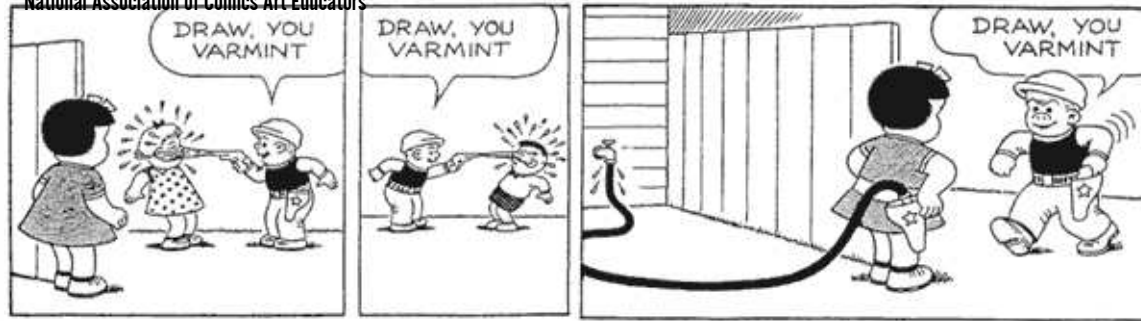
MISUNDERSTANDING



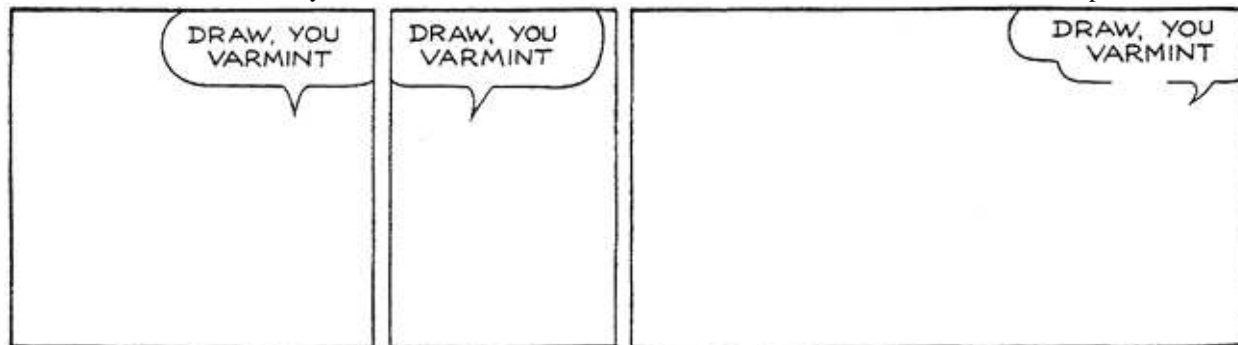
INCONGRUITY



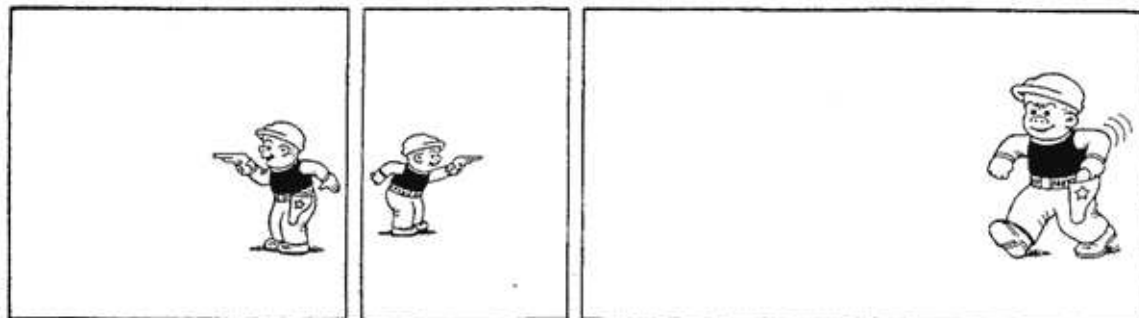
INVERSION



Above is a strip that goes down fast and clean. Let's slow it down and see what makes it work. The gag itself could be categorized as a basic problem solving type, and Nancy's few out-standing character traits are shown to full advantage in this episode. The strip has been chosen because it makes full use of the formal elements of comics in such a clear way. It is, somewhat of an exception to the Bushmiller oeuvre in that it allows the reader a shade more creative participation than usual. Rather than a slay- stick depiction in the final frame, the payoff is in the implied but nonexistent fourth frame. Yet it is so masterfully executed that It is worth a closer examination. Just what makes this strip work?



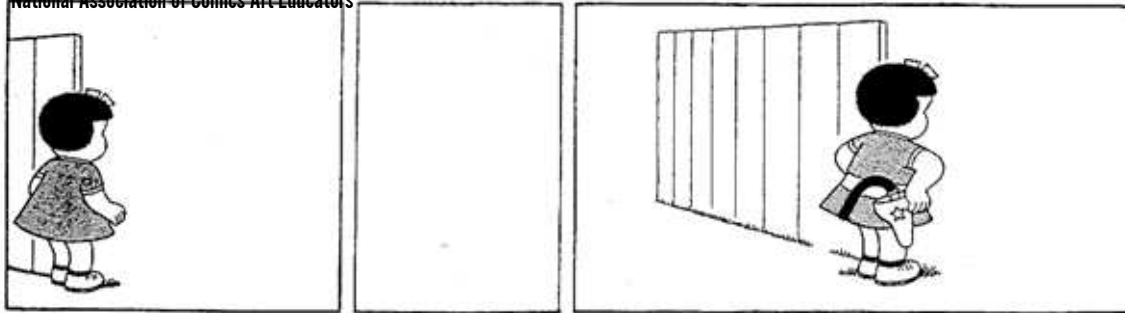
Although the dialogue was probably the last thing you "read" in scanning this strip, let's look at it first because it holds the key to much of what works within the strip. The phrase, "Draw you varmint", is Old-West cliché. It is at once cocky and confrontational, clearly within Sluggo's wont. T.V. Westerns were a craze when this strip was conceived, and the actual line was probably snarled countless times across America's airwaves. Notice where it is positioned in the frames: frame 1 - in the upper right, frame 2 - in the upper left, frame 3 - in the upper right again. The first time it is introduced to us, the second time it is established as a catch-phrase, then there is a 1/2 beat pause in the upper left of the third frame until it is repeated a final time. Comedy always comes in threes (another pop truism) and the repetition here creates a rhyme with the phrase itself becoming a verbal compliment to the gag's payoff



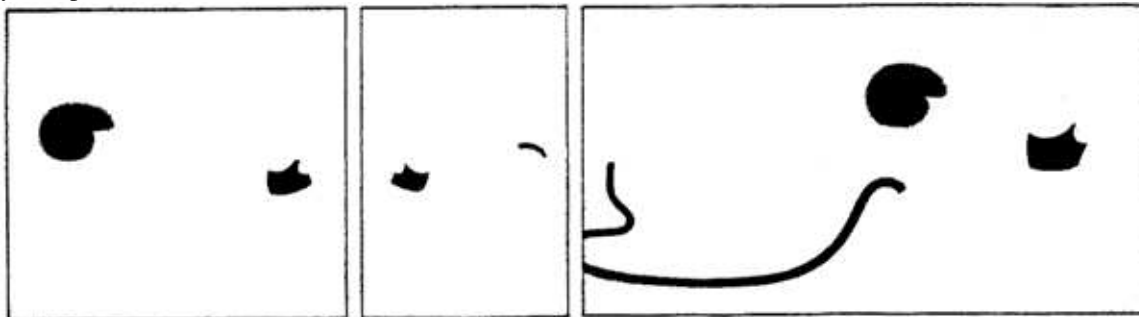
First Sluggo faces left, then right. then forward. Remember his dialogue remains the same so his movement here produces a visual counterpoint to the balloons while maintaining the essential rhythm. In one of his rare fashion decisions, Sluggo wears black. He is clearly the bad guy. Notice his face - at first he is filled with ecstatic glee as he shoots the two children. This glee is augmented with menacing eyebrows in the last frame as he stalks his prized victim. In this final showdown, as he advances forward he has be- come twice his size in previous frames, twice as threatening. (Nancy, the implied victor, is of course drawn bigger)

NACAE

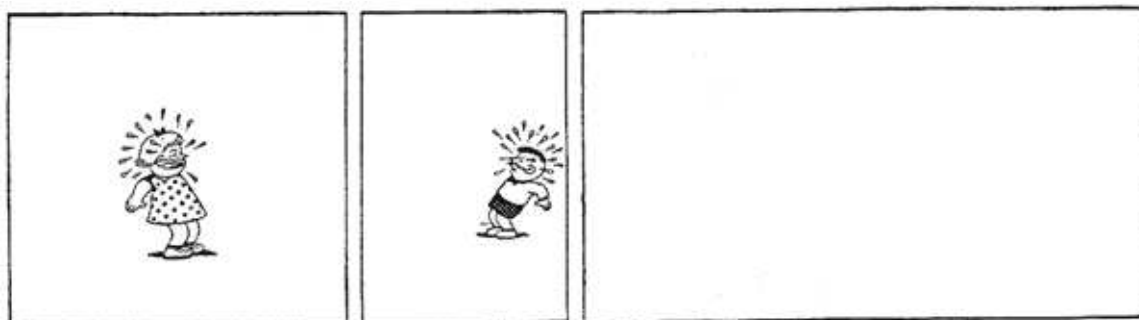
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Nancy witnesses and reloads. (Little wonder so many grown women remember this strip fondler. We do not see her face in this sagebrush vignette but like generations of fictional Western heroes, she remains stoic and aloof while assuming command; clearly the true varmint will get his. We do not see Nancy's face in the third frame because we do not have to. We do not see Nancy's face in the second frame because we do not have to. The fence serves a double function. In the first frame it is a shield for Nancy to peer around. In the third frame she has moved from its protection (notice the distance shift between her bow and the edge of the last board). But it is now there to hide the hose from Sluggo's eyes, yet so positioned to be visible to the reader.



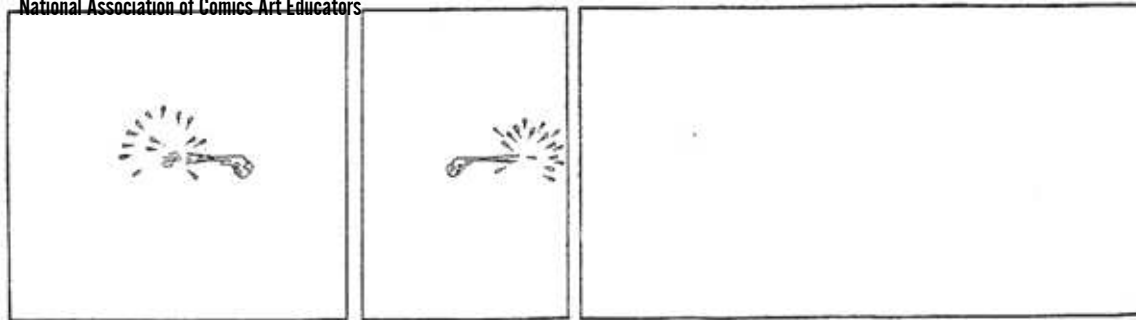
When all the lines are dropped out, this may not look like much at first. But look again. The spots of solid black have been extraordinarily carefully placed, and the eye follows them swiftly across the strip. Just connect-the-dots and you end up in the lap of Gagland. Even the black hose becomes a virtual arrow directing your eye to the inevitable denouement.



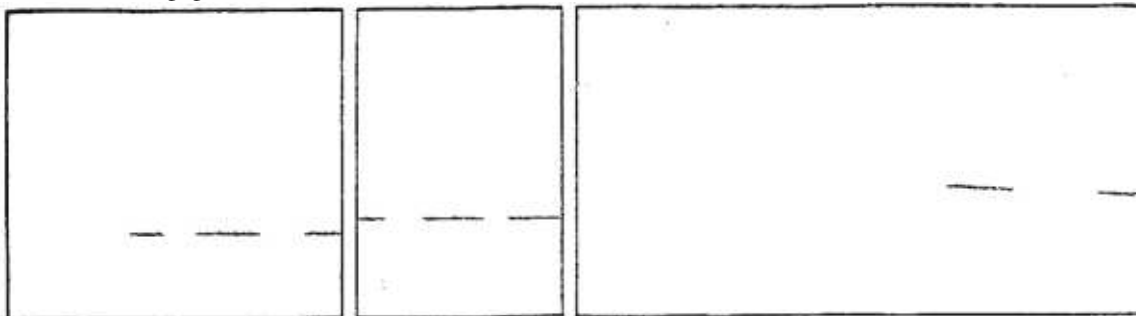
Just who are these early casualties of Sluggo's wet rampage? Bushmiller barely gives them the gratuity of facial features. They are merely props, ciphers cast from the Bushmiller stamp pad and never to be heard from again. Yet they are very important to the strip as victims. And we do kilos something about them. One is a defenseless little girl. (Does Nancy' see herself as an inversion of this girl with her straight white hair and black bow'?) The little boy is clearly a little boy with his short pants (as opposed to Sluggo's trousers) and sissy bow-tie (the bow directly signifying Nancy's kinship to the initial two victims). These are the damned of childhood, forever roaming the earth with arched backs and wet faces.

NACAE

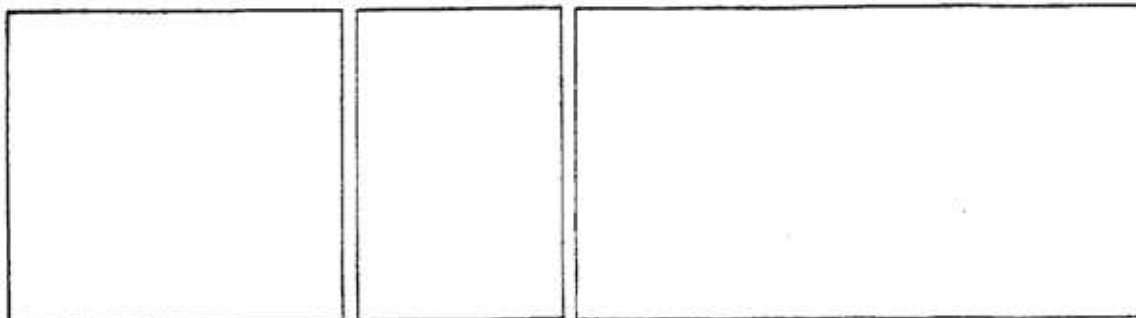
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In this example of a problem-solving gag, the objects introduced into the Nancy universe are a wa-tergun and a waterhose. Sluggo has got the gun and whips it out, with no provocation, to violate the innocent. That is, until sheriff Nancy recognizes him for the sociopath he really is. Big gun on girl, little gun on boy one is tempted to sub-classify this as an inversion gag). Yes, Dr. Freud, even in the comics!



The groundling swells upward to meet the gag in the last frame and actually helps to frame the gag itself. (Yet another arrow pointed at the gag.) This subtle upward movement also helps to indicate that time has passed between each frame. The grass blades presumably imply Nancy's backyard, but not necessarily. Bushmiller-the-architect equipped virtually every character in the strip with a home, when needed, of white slats with a white-slat fence. It could just as easily belong to one of the wet-faced tykes, "Irma" "Amy" or "Goofy Elmer". In between the frames lies the gutter, a realm of relativity where time and space mutely co-mingle waiting for the next frame.



Strip down the strip completely, and all we're left with is panel size. Anything at all can go into these panels, but we know what belongs in them. They were designed to hold (and hold back) a specific gag created on a certain day by a certain artist to be read for a laugh in the twinkling of an eye on another certain day by a few certain million people. Form follows function of the strip. You can't strip it down more than this folks.

You too can play this analytical game at home with every strip in this book, with amazing results. What you may have once considered simple will reveal itself as a complex fabrication of the highest order. Bushmiller's true art was in essence creating his own personal picture language (with the public's tools) and with it producing a quirky, individualistic, complex, daily theorem which any four-year old child could not help but understand.

"How to Read Nancy" copyright 1988 by Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik

Mark Newgarden is a co-creator of the "Garbage-pail Kids" whose work has appeared in RAW Magazine. Paul Karasik teaches at Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He is also a cartoonist.