

KEN REID – THE COMIC GENIUS



(1919 – 1987)

KEN REID – BRITAIN'S COMIC GENIUS © Peter Hansen 2004

It is difficult to describe the impact Ken Reid had on the British comic book market without first describing briefly what that market is all about. Even to this day the British comic book market bears no resemblance to its American counterpart. It's almost as if they are on two separate evolutionary tracks really.

In the UK comics for the most part have always been weekly publications. Historically they have been produced on newsprint resembling the Sunday funnies more than they do a comic put out by DC, Marvel, Dark Horse or any other US comic book publisher. Furthermore not only were they weekly and on newsprint but they were a mixture of humour with adventure strips in serialized form stretching over from one week to the next carrying a single storyline for weeks, sometimes months. So perhaps it would be best to think of them as weekly Sunday Funnies sections with Prince Valiant type adventure pages, and full page Blondie type humour strip stories side by side. Finally on top of this for most comic books there was no colour added except on the cover and back page, and the centre page, with all the interior pages just plain old black and white. Of course there were a few exceptions but they were few and far between.

Usually aimed at pre teens the British comic book relied heavily on humour strips and from his first appearance in 1953 in the Beano comic published by the giant DC Thomson and John Leng publishing companies Ken Reid made an immediate impact in this genre. Over the course of the next 25 years he would rise to the very top of his profession as one of, if not the best humour strip artist ever to dip a pen into an inkpot anywhere in the world.

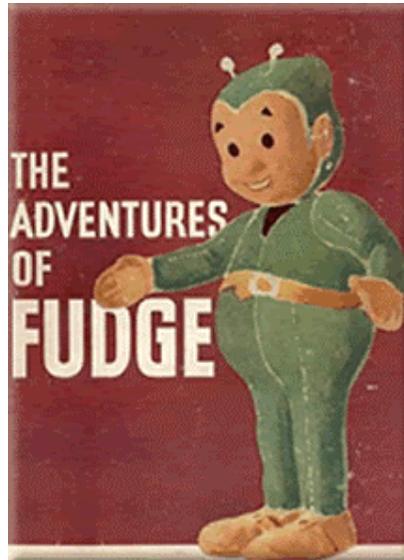
Born on the 19th of December 1919 in Manchester (same town and a few months before Lee Elias) Reid was a born artist. His mother was quick to tell friends and family that he was drawing recognisable things at the age of two. Like all kids of his day grew up on a diet of British comics such as Funny Wonder, Film Fun and Chips. At the age of nine Reid was diagnosed with a Tubercular hip and as a result was confined to bed for six months with the possibility that he would spend the rest of his life in a spinal carriage. Fortune smiled on him however and not only did he recover but throughout his illness he drew continuously. On leaving school at fourteen years of age Reid was granted a full scholarship to Salford Art School in Manchester. After four years and just before graduation Reid was expelled for refusing to sign a letter of apology when he was caught by the Principal during class time at a local café near to the school (boy have times changed!).

Having made the decision not to return to art school Reid set up his own studio in a room behind a store in Water Street Manchester in 1936. He made himself a large sign: KEN REID COMMERCIAL ARTIST and sat back waiting for the work to roll in. As he would comment many years later "Absolutely nothing happened!" Without a small amount of work from a Commercial Photographer in the same building, Reid would have quickly joined that well known fraternity of starving artists. Either way the amount of work was not enough to live on, and so he hit the streets visiting every Commercial Art studio in the telephone directory asking if they had any freelance work. In this way he managed to get a couple of minor jobs but still not enough to keep him going.

Eventually Reid's father intervened and offered to come around with him and act as his agent. Although Reid's father was not shy about going where angels fear to tread a whole day of slogging around the streets of Manchester produced nothing. At the point of going home Reid and his father found themselves outside of the Manchester Evening News offices (still in business!). A veritable impenetrable fortress, at least as far as young freelance artists were concerned. But not to Reid's father! With Reid in tow, he strode into the large imposing foyer and marched up to the peak capped, sergeant-major type Commissionaire and told him he had an appointment with the Art Editor. He delivered this line in such an authoritative fashion that the man immediately got a boy to take them up to the Art Editors office. Barton, the Editor looked blankly at them for a moment before saying that he didn't remember making an appointment with a Mr. Reid. At this point Reid's father confessed that he had lied in order to in to see him and show him his son's artwork.

Whether he admired his cheek or what we will never know but he invited them in and carefully went through Ken's portfolio. He then told them that the Evening News was thinking of starting a children's feature and various artists had already been asked to come up with ideas, adding that perhaps Ken would like to submit something? Reid immediately set to work and his first idea was to take advantage of the current craze for keeping budgerigars as pets. Why not turn one into a strip and call it "The Adventures of Budge". However Reid quickly discovered that he wasn't very good at drawing budgies and so he invented a companion he could feature on occasion so that he wouldn't have to draw a budgie all the time. He decided that the companion

would be a likeable little elf that he found he could draw and so he went through the alphabet to come up with a name for the elf that rhymed with “Budge” until he came up with “Fudge”. There he had it “The Adventures of Budge and Fudge”. The only problem was that after numerous tries he just couldn’t get into the budgie character and draw him well in a consistent fashion. So “Budge was dropped and the strip became “The Adventures of Fudge the Elf”, which was duly submitted to Mr. Barton. Reid freely admitted that the look of “Fudge” was influenced by Walt Disney’s Mickey Mouse to a great extent. Particularly the face which looked like Mickey Mouse with a cap on! Six weeks later Reid was hired and “Fudge” made his first strip appearance in the Evening News on April 7th 1938.



Fudge the Elf 1939

So popular did the strip become that a Fudge doll was in the stores for Xmas 1938, along with a hard bound annual of completely new stories called “The Adventures of Fudge the Elf” published by Hodder and Stoughton. A total of six other annuals based on reprinting the adventures of “Fudge the Elf” from the newspaper were published between 1941 and 1951, with “Fudge Turns Detective” the last. All of these annuals are extremely rare and very hard to come by. Even more difficult to find is Reid’s small ¼ page pamphlet of a character called Dilly Duckling produced by Brockhampton Press in 1948. This small one shilling pamphlet has an advertisement on the back for a Dilly Duckling squeaky rubber duck available from Hygienic Toys which as the add suggested “Brings Ken Reid’s character to life, more loveable than ever”. Clearly Reid was on the merchandising trail from the very beginning. Later however in 1956 this character would turn up in a story book called “The Adventures of Dilly Duckling” (same title as the pamphlet) but published by a children’s book publisher called George Newnes Limited, written by long time comic writer Arthur Groom with illustrations by another great British cartoonist called Harry Banger. No reference to Ken Reid at all, so one can only assume that Reid must have sold the rights, since by 1956 he would have been far too busy to develop his character.

Fudge the Elf was suspended during the war from 1941 until Reid was de-mobbed in 1946. Over the years that he wrote and drew “Fudge” Reid’s style matured and the detail he put into the panels, coupled with his imagination and development of new

characters in the “Fudge” world turned the strip into a very accomplished piece of comic art.



Dilly Duckling Advertisement circ 1948

However as much as he loved “Fudge” by 1952 Reid realised that he could draw more than just the three panels a day for the newspaper, so he began to cast his net around the major comic book publishers. His first catch was with Amalgamated Press, the oldest, largest and most established comic book publisher in the UK at that time. For them he drew his own creation “Foxy” and another set called “Super Sam” in the style of the regular artists which Reid did not enjoy doing at all. Both sets appeared in a long running comic called “Comic Cuts”. A relic of an earlier age and unknown to Reid this comic was on its last legs and not long after he began working for Amalgamated Press he received a letter telling him that it was winding up and that as they say was that! In a curious and unrelated coincidence the British

comic book market appears to have mirrored the plight of the American comic book market during 1953/54 with a number of titles falling by the wayside.

At this point Reid's career took a fortuitous turn for the better (thanks to an introduction by his brother in law, DC Thomson artist Bill Holroyd) when he received a letter from DC Thomson asking if he would be interested in doing a new series entitled "Roger the Dodger" for their best selling comic 'The Beano'. For many years DC Thomson had been considered to be a poor Scot's relation when compared to the mighty Amalgamated Press (AP). However since the end of the Second World War Thomson had been eating away at AP's circulation. In the early 1950's a change of the guard with respect to their in house art staff had seen the addition of young whippersnappers such as Leo Baxendale, Paddy Brennan, the brilliant Davy Law and others who had revitalized their line of comics in the same way Marvel had done against DC in the early 1960's. The addition of Ken Reid was tantamount to adding the jewel in the crown and within a very short space of time 'The Beano' was selling in excess of one million copies per week!!!

It's interesting to note that such was the importance placed on the addition of Ken Reid and the introduction of 'Roger the Dodger' that the Managing Editor of DC Thomson, R.D. Lowe traveled down from Dundee in Scotland to Manchester in England to meet with Reid and discuss the project. In their meeting Lowe described 'Roger' as young lad forever "dodging" out of things through various bizarre schemes he concocted. After some discussion Reid drew up a few versions of how he envisaged the character and Lowe selected his favorite. With this the deal was done and Reid became a freelance artist with DC Thomson drawing a half page "Roger the Dodger" set every week with the first set appearing in 'The Beano' dated April 18th 1953. Originally a half page set 'Roger' soon became a full page set.

Soon after Reid was asked to draw a second feature called "Angel Face" DC Thomson's other big selling comic of the day, 'The Dandy'. An angelic prankster Reid was later to admit he never liked drawing female characters. A conclusion the Editor of the 'Dandy' obviously arrived at after only a short time, and Reid was asked instead to turn his talents towards a male feature called "Grandpa". Reid soon got his teeth into this character who was a scallywag of an old codger who behaved like a schoolboy although he was eighty if he was a day and he lived with his DAD who must have been over a hundred! Like "Roger", "Grandpa" quickly became extremely popular with readers and ran for many years after Reid stopped drawing him. The following year Reid was asked by the Editor of 'The Dandy' to add another character to his growing list, and this time it was right up his alley. Set in the Wild West, the feature called "Bing Bang Benny" was about a young man who had a dangerous preoccupation with explosives. He was always blowing up things.



A classic half page Roger the Dodger set by Reid from "The Beano" #853 dated November 22nd 1958.

The other interesting thing about the "Bing Bang Benny" strip was that it was set in the Wild West. This gave Reid the opportunity to let his imagination run wild which he did on a number of the stories.

In addition to his work for DC Thomson and Fudge for the Manchester Evening News, Reid was also producing a competition page for the Irish edition of the Sunday Express newspaper, which he drew for many years.

On March 15th 1958 Reid's personal favorite series began in The Beano. "Jonah", the story of a goofy looking jinxed mariner who sunk every ship he set foot on was the beginning of Reid's best comic work, and quite possibly his

very best comic work in many peoples eyes. It certainly brought out the best in him at that time of his career, and Reid was quoted on a number of occasions as saying that it was his personal favorite. Written by Walter Fearne who was later to become an Editor with DC Thomson, "Jonah" swept to the top of the of the popularity charts, even displacing the hugely popular "Dennis the Menace" by Davy Law.

All of the "Jonah" scripts were written by Fearne and Reid admitted that they quite often had him laughing out loud. Although Fearne usually made provision for about twelve panels per page, it was not unusual for Reid to cram in up to 36!



"Bing Bang Benny" from 'The Dandy' 1958.

When questioned about this on one occasion Reid replied: "Ah, um, yes....well the way Fearne described a particular incident often set me off on a train of thought that had me creating additional scenes (panels). I admit that sometimes simply got carried away things. I've always had trouble just drawing a script as it is written. This usually means lots more work on my part, and that's why I'm not rich. I simply

like to take what has been sent to me and do the best possible job I can do with it, even if it is a lot more work.”

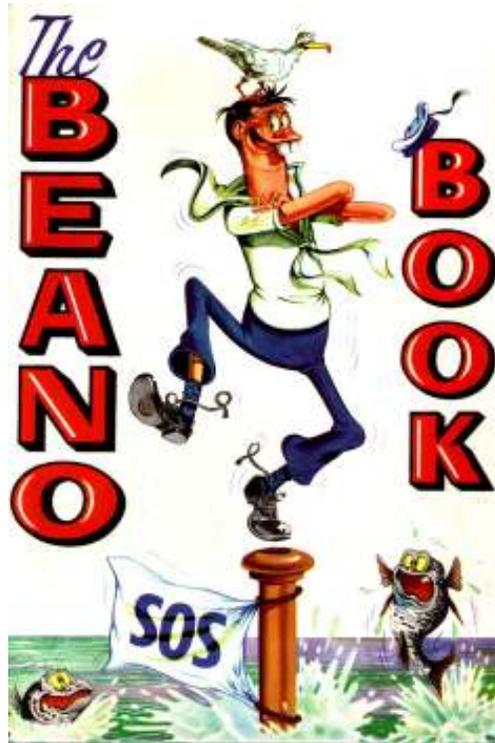
Not only did DC Thomson not object to this enhancement of the scripts, but they acquiesced when Reid decided to carry over a story into the next week's issue with one week's adventure leading to another. This was unique for a humour strip at that time. On one occasion Reid caused a bit of a stir and a lot of merriment in the Beano office when quite unintentionally (so he claimed) he added a perfect caricature of the Beano Editor, George Mooney into the “Jonah” strip. By 1958 Reid had really hit his stride on “Jonah” when he changed the appearance of the character to a completely chinless ‘goof’ with the famous elongated neck. So popular was the character that Reid in response to a letter to the Editor got carried away and produced a life size image of “Jonah” for the sailors onboard the Royal Navy Aircraft Carrier ‘H.M.S. Victorious’ which they duly hung on the bulkhead in their mess.

In 1960 Reid began another new strip called “Ali Ha Ha and the 40 Thieves”, this time for ‘The Dandy’. The son of a police sergeant in old Arabia Ali was always getting into trouble while trying to help his dad catch the 40 Thieves. This usually ended up with his dad getting locked up in the pokey rather than the bad guys. Such was the popularity of this strip that it ended up as a colour feature on the back page of the comic. To me this was just another great strip by Reid but with a difference. The number of characters that appeared in the strip every week must have taxed even Reid's ability to create different faces for each one. But such was his ability at that time that he handled it with consummate ease.

In 1963 ‘Ali’ was replaced on the back page of ‘The Dandy’ by “Big Head and Thick Head”. Two hilarious school boys one brainy one dumb who managed to get into all kinds of trouble every week. Concurrently Reid also started drawing “Jinx” a new feature for the inside pages of ‘The Beano’, a troublesome little girl who had the same kind of bad luck as “Jonah”.

In 1964 the unthinkable happened, Reid always a freelance artist left DC Thomson to work for Odhams a competitor who had lured away their other “gem”, Leo Baxendale. When asked about the change Reid quite candidly admitted it was all to do with money. In 1963 Reid was being paid £18 (pounds) a page (about \$33 US in today's money). Odhams offered Reid £30 a page to come and draw for them in their new comic to be called “Wham” which they intended to launch that year to compete with the hugely popular Beano and Dandy comics of DC Thomson. Curiously enough this was the same sort of thing that was happening between Marvel and DC Comics at the same time in the USA.

Reid didn't want to leave but a £12 pound a page increase in those days was substantial to say the least! He wrote to DC Thomson to tell them of the offer and to request a raise of one half of what Odhams had offered to gladly stay with them. He received a response from R.D. Low the Managing Editor of DC Thompson juvenile publications for over forty years saying that Odhams offer was quite unrealistic and he wasn't prepared to increase my page rate by any amount. There was nothing further to be said except that Reid immediately stopped working for Thomson's and joined Odhams.



"Jonah" on the cover of 'The Beano' book for 1963.



A "Big Head and Thick Head" composite by Reid ca. 1963



"Ali Ha Ha and the 40 Thieves" from the Dandy Annual 1963.

Early in 1964 after the deal was struck Alf Wallace the Managing Editor of Odhams Group and Albert Cosser the new Editor of the new comic to be called 'Wham' went to Manchester to meet Reid and discuss concepts for new sets. When Reid told them of his unfulfilled passion for comic horror Cosser immediately threw out an idea for a set to be called "Frankie Stein". This series turned out to be one of the most popular in British comic's history and it ran for more than twenty years. Taking the broad concept from Cosser Reid created the character and wrote all of the scripts as well as penciling and inking the pages. This was the first time on a comic set that Reid had a completely free hand and it showed.

From here Reid moved on to one of his most interesting characters called "Jasper the Grasper". Uniquely set in Victorian rather than modern day England, 'Jasper McGrabb' of 13 Stingy St. was the richest old miser for miles around. Designed to compete with the flagships of DC Thomson 'Wham' lasted for only 187 issues from June 1964 to January 1968 but with Reid and Baxendale leading the charge they were some issues.



"Frankie Stein" from the pages of Wham.

Once 'Wham' had hit the streets and was selling well Odhams brought out a companion comic called 'Smash' in February 1966. For this comic Reid produced what some consider to be his crowning glory, a set called "Queen of the Seas". This was a "Jonah" type series about a couple of real idiots with a steamship of the same name as the series. In this old bucket they traveled the seven seas lurching from one disaster to another in hilarious fashion.

In addition Reid took over a two page set from the great 'Leo Baxendale' called "The Nerves". It turned out to be just Reid's 'thing'. Located in the world inside of a fat glutton's body Reid had no end of opportunity to indulge him self in comic horror. It was while working on Smash that he developed a reputation for sneaking in 'naughty' bits into kid's comics that the editors soon became acutely aware of. Things like a gallows located far off in the distance in one panel with one of the Nerves dangling from a short rope. Such things were definitely not suitable for a juvenile publication in those days.

Launched in January 1967 the short lived 'Pow' comic was an experiment in mixing reprints of Marvel (US) strips in black and white with classic British humour strips that never quite took off. Not even the inclusion of Spiderman, Nick Fury and The Fantastic Four could sustain the comic for more than 12 months before it merged with the faltering 'Wham', lasting only another 9 months before disappearing forever. For 'Pow' however Reid created the excellent "Dare a Day Davy" about a schoolboy who could not resist a dare, all of which were provided by the readers. In one instance Reid's set about a dare requiring Davy to resurrect "Frankenstein" was so 'risqué' that the editors pulled it before being published and it never saw the light of day. That is until the Artwork was rescued by 'Steve Moore' (writer 2000 AD, America's Best etc.) and published in David Britton's Weird Fantasy magazine in 1969.

SECONDS LATER, THE TWO POWERFUL FORCES UNITE, AND EVERY DEPARTMENT OF FATTY'S NERVOUS-SYSTEM GRINDS SUDDENLY TO A STIFFENED, AND STARCHED STANDSTILL!

FATTY!
I'M BACK



A classic view inside of 'Fatty' from "The Nerves"

Next on Reid's agenda was another comic horror series called "Face Ache" which he scripted and drew for almost ten years. A mischievous schoolboy billed as 'The Boy with a Thousand Faces' he could change his facial appearance by using what was known as the 'Scrunge' effect.

Over the period of the series these changes became more and more bizarre and fantastic until he could alter his complete appearance and change into absolutely anything. At the same time as "Face Ache" was on the go, Reid was also producing one page 'fillers' for 'Whoopee' ("Wanted Posters" & "World Wide Wierdies") and 'Shiver and Shake' ("Creepy Creations"). These were usually based on suggestions from the readers also who received a cash prize for their suggestions.

As the 70's drew to a close Reid was called on to add "Martha's Monster Makeup" ('Monster Fun') to his repertoire as well as "Tom Horrors World" (a take off of the British TV Show called "Tomorrows World") in 'Wow' and then 'Whoopee'. "Martha" was a cute little girl who had a jar full of make up that had monstrous effects whenever she applied it! "Tom Horror" was a bespectacled boy in coveralls who is a schoolboy inventor. Tom's proud pa is invariably always the recipient of his inventions gone wrong!

Named Best Writer and Best Artist by the British Society of Strip Illustrators in 1978, Ken Reid sadly passed away In March 1987. For me Reid was unequalled, his zany humour and the variety of characters he produced combined with the ever increasing detail he put into every panel made his work instantly distinguishable and a cut above the rest. I don't believe we will ever see his like again.

(Thanks go to Alan Clarke and Ray Moore for their assistance with this article)