

SHELTER STORIES



Inspired by Patrick McDonnell's MUTTS and SHELTER STORIES . . .

The Northwest is blessed by amazing organizations and individuals serving animals in need. This month local businesses "adopted" some of these great organizations. Come inside and meet them! Perhaps you'll be inspired to lend your heart and hands too!



Patrick and Earl

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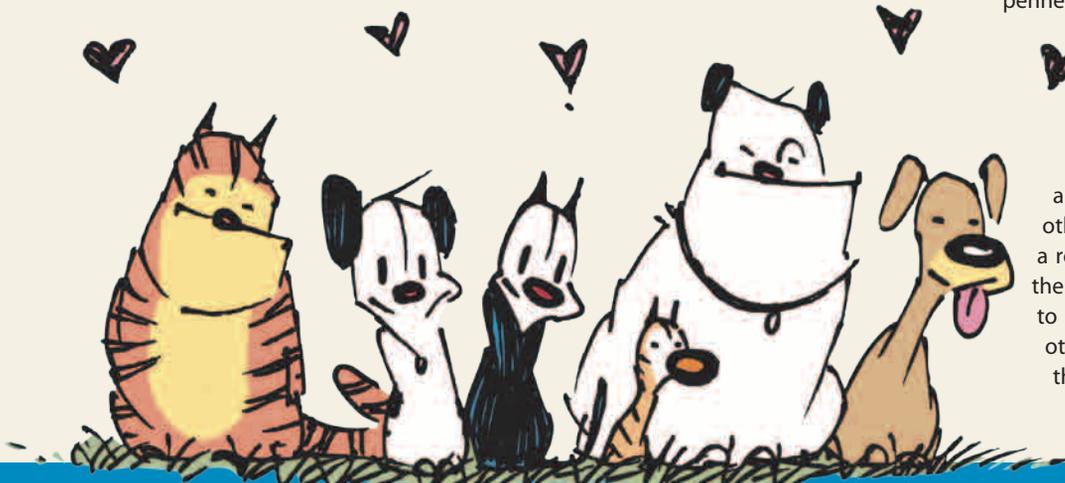
Meet Patrick McDonnell

Nikki Jardin • Spot Magazine

Patrick McDonnell has won national and international acclaim for his long-running comic strip MUTTS, including Cartoonist of the Year and five Harvey awards from the National Cartoonists Society, plus an array of accolades from many luminaries. Late science fiction writer Ray Bradbury, for example, called MUTTS his favorite comic during one of his last public appearances. McDonnell's hero and mentor, Charles Schulz, called MUTTS "one of the best comic strips of all time." Hearing that just months after MUTTS began, McDonnell joked, "Now I can retire."

We're glad he kept on. Now in its 18th year, MUTTS appears in more than 700 newspapers in 20 countries. McDonnell has also penned 11 children's books, the most recent, *The Monster's Monster*, was released in September.

MUTTS is more than a daily serving of levity in the funny papers. The adventures of Earl and Mooch, Ozzie and Millie, Shtinky Puddin', Crabby and others are a meditation, a respite, and a reminder to stand witness to not only the beauty of the natural world, but also to the four-legged, winged, finned and other creatures with whom we share the planet. McDonnell's attention and





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sensitivity to this has earned him additional awards, such as the PETA Humanitarian Award and The Humane Society of the United States’s Hollywood Genesis Award for Ongoing Commitment.

These honors reflect the essence of MUTTS, whose characters live in a world enveloped in love, friendship and the occasional mischievous antic or epic adventure. There is often time for reflection on the bond of human/animal friendship, but even more prevalent are observations of the simple wonders of the natural world; a reflection, McDonnell says, of his own upbringing.

“When I was growing up we would leave our house in the summertime at about 7 o’clock in the morning and didn’t come home until seven at night,” McDonnell told Spot recently in a phone interview from his home studio in New Jersey.

“Our whole life was outdoors. We would spend most of the day playing in the woods next to our house. That’s a big theme of MUTTS and of all my children’s books. I want to try to remind kids that there’s a big, beautiful world out there; that they’re a part of it, and that they should enjoy and embrace it.”

While working, McDonnell spends time considering what might be important to the animals in his strip. This often comes down to “weather, nature and just the simple things in life,” he says.

Unlike many comic strips featuring animals, McDonnell strives to keep MUTTS’s characters firmly entrenched in the animal world, physically and philosophically.

“I knew in the beginning that I wanted to keep the characters as animal-like as possible, and not just have a dog and a cat doing human things like working on a computer or whatever a lot of cartoons do.”

Looking through the eyes of his characters also allows McDonnell to take on more formidable issues animals face, including concerns about the growing number of endangered species, the use of animals for entertainment or food, and, of course, homeless pets/shelter animals.

“In trying to see the world through their eyes I think I just got more and more educated about how tough it is for a lot of animals on this planet, and as I got educated, that crept into the MUTTS narrative.”

McDonnell’s education was furthered in 2000, when he was invited to join the board of the Humane Society of the United States, a seat he still holds and credits for helping expand his knowledge of animal welfare issues. “It became a stronger part of me and a bigger part of the strip.”

McDonnell weaves social commentary into the strip with a carefully considered deftness, and says he has yet to run into an issue he

couldn’t tackle. “The tricky part is doing the tightrope of not being too preachy,” he says. “Some animal issues are really horrible and tough, and I try to explain that without hitting someone over the head.”

One of the biggest hot buttons with readers is Guard Dog, the perpetually chained, often lonely, and ever-hopeful Bulldog who longingly waits for freedom.

McDonnell says he continually gets emails and letters from readers pleading him to free Guard Dog from his chain, something he has acknowledged will happen ... eventually.

“It’s something I’m definitely going to do, and I’ve actually already written the storyline,” he says, “but I feel like he has a role to play. If he can inspire one person to unchain their dog, it’s worth keeping him on the chain in the strip.” Interestingly, McDonnell sketches Guard Dog happy and free in his sketchbooks.

A doodler from a young age, McDonnell was drawn to the comic mastery of Walt Kelly’s “Pogo,” George Herriman’s “Krazy Kat,” and of course Schulz’s “Peanuts.” He attended the School of Visual Arts in New York City and went on to become a magazine illustrator for several publications, including the New York Times Sunday Magazine, Sports Illustrated, Reader’s Digest and

Time. He also created the monthly strip “Bad Baby,” which ran for 10 years in *Parents Magazine*. McDonnell’s love of the daily strip inspired him to create MUTTS in 1994.

His long appreciation of comic art also inspired McDonnell to “play” with his Sunday strip’s “Title Panel,” rendering MUTTS characters in the styles and settings of classic comics such as “Dick Tracy,” “The Flash” and “Popeye.” Others have reflected sometimes surprising art media, such as classic movie posters and record album art. In fact, one inspired by R. Crumb’s cover art for the “Cheap Thrills” album by Big Brother and the Holding Company was a huge hit with MUTTS followers.

“I got more response from that Sunday page than any other I ever did,” says McDonnell. “It really makes you realize just how visual we are — between pop culture and art and everything else. I try to do images that kind of relate to the story on the Sunday page, but I also try to do images of particular pieces of art or pop culture that mean something to me.”

As those Sunday title panels allow McDonnell to flex his creative muscles, he says the children’s books allow him to artistically stretch beyond what is possible within the confines of a comic strip.

“With the strip you have a limited amount of space; it has to be in black and white, and there isn’t room for a lot of words. What’s nice about the book is that I get to play with art. I get to do watercol-

ors or colored pencils — there’s a lot of freedom.”

And while he enjoys that freedom, it isn’t necessarily McDonnell’s primary goal. “I really just love telling stories with words and pictures, and I think with both a comic strip and a kids book you really need to get to the essence of the matter; you really need to tell the story very simply and directly.”

Even when tackling some of the tougher issues in the MUTTS strip McDonnell says he keeps balance and draws inspiration from positive changes he’s seen over the years and the people doing difficult work on the ground.

“I think of all the good people doing their best to help animals, and you have to stay positive. I mean just in the last 20 years I can think of all the changes that have happened — you see light bulbs going off in peoples’ heads all the time. More and more people are going vegetarian — I definitely feel like things can change, and that keeps me positive.”

McDonnell gives a hearty shout-out to the thousands of shelter and rescue workers throughout the nation. “They are definitely underappreciated, but what keeps me going is all the great people I meet who have dedicated their lives to doing such great work. Then again I feel like the message is getting out there more and more. Nothing makes me happier than getting a letter from someone saying they decided to adopt their new best friend. That always makes my

day. I’m proud that the strip has inspired people to either adopt or care more about animals, or even go vegan or vegetarian.”

McDonnell mentions his own animal pack — Amalie, an adopted Jack Russell Terrier; MeeMow, a cat McDonnell’s wife Karen rescued from a Jersey City parking garage; and Not Ootie, a feral cat who’d been “hanging around” McDonnell’s house for more than a year.

“He wouldn’t even come near me for a year, year and a half,” McDonnell says. “We fed him and built a little outdoor house that we heated for the winter. He’s this gorgeous black cat with the greatest green eyes — a really big, tough guy. It took almost two years, but the light finally went off in his head. We have him in the house now and he couldn’t be a nicer cat.”

Earl, the Jack Russell that inspired the little Terrier in MUTTS, passed away a few years ago at the age of 19.

In addition to the daily strip, McDonnell is currently working on a MUTTS movie in development with Blue Sky Studios, the same studio that produced the films *Ice Age* and *Horton Hears A Who*. “I’m really excited about working with them for many reasons. They get it exactly right. For example, even though their animation is CGI, they were somehow able to keep Dr. Seuss’s art and line looking like Dr. Seuss.”

So, what will Earl and Mooch sound like on the big screen?

“That’s been something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately,” he says. “Nothing’s been decided, and I can’t say who — but I’m starting to get ideas about who might be the right voice for Earl and Mooch and the rest of the characters. It’s funny, for all of the years I’ve been drawing MUTTS, the



voice in the head was MY voice — it’s only been recently that I’m starting to think what they would really sound like and who should do it. It’s a whole different way to look at what they might sound like.”

MUTTS’s fans will have to be patient to see how their favorite characters get the movie treatment; developing an animated film is a lengthy process. “If all goes well,” says McDonnell with a laugh, “it’s still years away.”

When asked if Earl and Mooch still surprise him, McDonnell answered with a laugh. “Definitely. It’s still an adventure, and it’s probably cliché to say that they kind of write themselves, but it really is true when you live with the characters so long. I think visually, so I always sketch. I don’t really write I just do drawings. Then I’ll think of something Mooch can do, and once you draw Mooch in a certain situation you really sort of get a feeling of what he might say or do. I think the fun of it is to try to surprise yourself every day. Surprise is a big part of humor, and a big part of comic art, so after doing it for 17 years it’s still fun to try to surprise yourself.”

Catch up on MUTTS news, see descriptions of your favorite characters and take a look at some of those Sunday “title panels” at MuttsComics.com. 



Nikki Jardin is a Portland-based freelance writer who loves to write about people dedicated to making the world a better place for all beings.

