Review of Michael Tisserand, *Krazy: George Herriman, A Life in Black and White*. (New York: Harper, 2016)

Taimi Olsen

Michael Tisserand's 2016 biography, *Krazy: George Herriman, A Life in Black and White*, has been lauded by book reviewers and the reading population, was a notable *New York Times* book of 2017, winner of the Eisner award for best comics-related book, and was a finalist in the biography category for both the National Book Critics Circle and the Pen America Literary Awards. This review cannot replace such insightful reviews as Nelson George's *New York Times* "Invisibly Black: A Life of George Herriman, Creator of 'Krazy Kat'." What may be of interest to Cummings scholars, is how this biography adds to our understanding of Cummings and key influences on his life such as the Krazy Kat series. Although direct references to Cummings in the book are few, Tisserand tells the story well of the genesis of Krazy Kat and Herriman's popularity among 1920's artists and writers. Tisserand notes that the surreal dialogue and shifting backgrounds of strip as we know it coincided with the advent of the Armory Show of 1913 (237-244). So it is not surprising that Harvard students with an interest in modern art like T. S. Eliot and Conrad Aiken would discuss the strip with "enormous pleasure." Two years later, E. E. Cummings papered his dorm room with Krazy Kat comics, and in 1917, Harvard graduate Summerfield Baldwin wrote an essay pronouncing Herriman "A Genius of the Comic Page" (277-278). And Gilbert Seldes (Harvard 1914), Cummings' life-long friend and "Herriman's most perceptive (and persistent) fan" (296), wrote his first appreciation of *Krazy* for *The Dial* in June 1920.

Krazy adds to our understanding of a generation of American artists preceding Cummings, bringing us a stronger sense of the complex American culture into which E. E. C. was born. By the time George Seldes, E. E. Cummings and other artists had taken notice of the cartoons of "indescribable beauty" as Cummings called them, Herriman was living a full life centered on career and family, a life in which his childhood Creole identity had been almost completely submerged, appearing only in disguise in the key character of Krazy Kat. Any scholar of Cummings knows how important George Herriman's Krazy Kat cartoons were to him. Cummings noted that he only read the *New York Evening Journal* for the cartoons of Tad Dorgan and Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (archives). This book is valuable in

showing how the lives of Herriman and Cummings overlapped, one influencing the other, and helps us visualize trends in American society and popular culture, reported on and created by the generation immediately preceding that of Cummings.

Tisserand divides the book into four major sections: Watta Woil, The Greek, Coconino, and Maravilla (the home where Herriman's life ended). The biography begins with well-researched and much-needed information on Herriman's ancestors and the life of his extended family in New Orleans. The first two chapters provide crucial insight, and through historic family background in the context of pre- and post- Civil War New Orleans, readers get the full context of Herriman's adult working life in the racially-divided United States.

George Joseph Herriman, cartoonist, was born on August 22, 1880, in New Orleans. His extended family was central to the community, active in social, church, and political life. Tisserand recounts the 1971 discovery of the birth certificate, labeling Herriman as colored, as the first time Herriman is identified as African American. He traces Herriman's family back to his white great-grandfather, a boat captain named George Joseph Herriman who maintained two families in New Orleans, one with his white wife by marriage and one with a 'free woman of color' named Justine Oliver, by whom he had two sons, Frederick and George Herriman, grandfather of the cartoonist. The rest of the chapter quickly addresses New Orleans in 1850s and 60s; how his grandfather helped lead black protests and attended meetings of a racially integrated Mason's Lodge.

Yet, in 1890, after years of post-emancipation violence and unrest in New Orleans, George Herriman's parents left their extended family, taking the children to California, where none of the immediate family acknowledged their roots. Due to Herriman's silence about his childhood, direct first-person testimony about his Creole background is lacking, other than what is said about race in the cartoons themselves. What is wonderfully interesting and helpful is to have this first portion of Herriman's life, the history of his family's roots in Creole society. It bears repeating here, as reviewer Nelson George notes, that "Herriman was 10 at the time, old enough to be aware of the color line that defined American race relations." It would be particularly obvious to a 10-year-old when his family moves from a Creole community immersed in community politics in a period of upheaval to a community where they no longer have those multiple ties but are instead, as Tisserand explains, passing. From his description, it is obvious that the Herriman's father and likely Herriman himself were not simply "*passé blanc*" or passively passing as white, but "*blanc fo'cé*," an active, intentional form of passing (36). These first two chapters make for rich reading with implications about the consequences of passing that Tisserand

continues to interweave through his telling of Herriman's life and career, particularly in the creation of the Krazy Kat strips. Tisserand notes as well that neither his parents, nor the children ever return to visit family left in New Orleans, even for funerals of relatives.

Part 2, titled "The Greek," addresses Herriman's early working life, when at age 19, he arrived in New York City and lived on Coney Island at the turn of the century, and quickly became part of a lively newspaper culture. As a newspaperman, Herriman is known for kinky hair, never taking off his hat, and being fun. In 1902 Herriman married Mabel Bridge (95), moved back to the west coast, and continued to produce a variety of comics, as well as illustrations for sports and other events. The early comics by Herriman and his colleagues are entwined with the culture of sports (especially boxing), vaudeville, and drinking, as well as echoing the tropes of the minstrel show, blackface, and "coon songs." Because of his dark complexion, his fellow cartoonists at the *Los Angeles Examiner* bestowed on Herriman a nickname reminiscent of the world of boxing, "George the Greek" (153). Tisserand reports that the "artists constantly joked to Herriman about his hair," with one writer slipping into print a line about "rubbing all the 'witch threads' out of George the Greek's kinky locks" (154). This section ends with a discussion of the "race anxiety" around African American heavyweight, Jack Johnson and the integrated fight with boxer Tommy Burns, which Johnson won in 1908, in Australia. Both Tad Dorgan and Herriman had admired Johnson for years and Johnson regularly appeared in Herriman's cartoons, where Herriman poked fun at the absurd injustice of the color line, even while using minstrel imagery (plaid pants, top hat, cane, blackface) (195-200). One cartoon about a 1910 fight depicts a white fighter dragging a black cat on a leash away from the "Lily White Inn"; in another, a much larger cat breaks out of his cage. In both drawings, the black cat has a white face—"a template for the earliest version of Krazy Kat" (200). At the same time he was drawing these cartoons, Herriman himself dressed in blackface for a benefit performance. A complex racial performativity seems at play here: Herriman, passing as white, performs a racist minstrel caricature, all while inventing a black cat with a white face to represent an African-American boxer.

This back story found in Herriman's cartoons passed well under the radar of the avant-garde admirers of *Krazy Kat* in the late teens and early twenties.[1] In Part Three, "Coconino," which addresses the mature part of Herriman's life, the Krazy Kat cartoons move to center stage, Charlie Chaplin's influence appears, and Herriman's trips to Arizona provide the setting of Coconino county and the influence of the Navajo. Herriman spends time on both coasts and multiple papers feature Ignatz throwing bricks at the Kat. Interestingly, in this part of this life, Herriman and the

avant-garde cross paths on occasion. In 1917, events sponsored by a group of artists called "the Penguins" included sketch classes funded by an annual costume ball that featured a pageant produced by the artists, including Herriman (275). In 1917, the Penguins sponsored the three-week art exhibit by the Vorticists, and Tisserand notes how elements of vorticist painting such as "patterns of jagged lines," and a "nearly blank page" soon appeared in the Krazy cartoons. In one strip, Ignatz asks Krazy what he sees. " 'Nuttin', says Krazy" (276). Of course, the influence went both ways. Tisserand writes that the "entrance into postwar Paris art and literature circles can be traced to E. E. Cummings" (297-298). The circle widened when Matthew Josephson introduced the strip to Louis Aragon and the surrealists (299).[2] In 1921, John Alden Carpenter composed *Krazy Kat—A Jazz Pantomime*, which was presented as a ballet the following year. Although Herriman wrote "can't imagine K. Kat, I. Mouse, O. Pupp, and J. Stork cavorting and pirouetting en ballet to save my life" (303), the ballet was a "modest success" and critics "raved" about Herriman's creation of Coconino scenery as backdrop (308-309). Yet, except for his friendship with Gilbert Seldes, and collaboration with John Carpenter, Herriman kept to his own generation of newspaper colleagues on the whole—he even moved into the Hal Roach studio lot, taking part of an office with friend and silent movie title writer Beanie Walker (with no evidence that he was ever hired or paid rent, says Tisserand).

The success of *Krazy Kat* leads us to the last part of Herriman's life. Part Four covers Herriman's purchases of homes, his wife's death in a car accident, Herriman's ongoing ill health, the adult lives of his daughters (and death due to epilepsy of one) and his time with one grandchild. In this last part, Tisserand addresses changes in cartoon production, the growth of Hollywood film studios, and the ongoing intellectual fanbase of Herriman's work. Herriman worked until his death in 1944; on the day before he died, the papers published a cartoon of Krazy standing at a cliff, watching Ignatz walk by with a brick (423). A final cartoon, "published two months after Herriman's death" featured Officer Pupp rescuing Krazy Kat from near death by drowning (429).

Although Herriman's circle of family and friends had grown small, his fans remained devoted. Tisserand maintains that Cummings was responsible for editing the 1946 collection of Kat cartoons that features the poet's "A Foreword to Krazy." Although the front matter of the *Krazy Kat* anthology does not credit Cummings with choosing the cartoons for inclusion, Tisserand cites as support a letter from Gilbert Seldes offering to loan Cummings his collection of "masterpieces" and to help with

"whatever clerical or other assistance" that might be necessary (430). The implications of editorial control are very enticing but remain beyond the scope of this review. In any case, this collection was influential: Tisserand notes that it inspired filmmaker Fritz Lang, animator Ralph Bakshi, and cartoonist Charles Schulz. Tisserand ends his biography with a brief account of other influences, once the cartoons began to be reprinted.

Notes

1. Editor's note: No evidence has yet come to light that Cummings perceived the racial subtext in *Krazy Kat*, but like Herriman, Cummings, too, defended an African-American boxer, Harry Wills, who was long denied a fight with Jack Dempsey. See the publication for the first time in this issue of Cummings' short essay on Wills and the boxing establishment.
2. Editor's note: Since Cummings knew Aragon before Josephson did, it is likely that Cummings introduced the French surrealist to the strip rather than Josephson.

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