

Lipstick on My Collar: My Affair with Carol Day

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Acquaintance

I first made Carol Day's acquaintance in 2002 when David Roach's article "The Best Artist You Don't Know" was published in *Comic Book Artist*. For an American collector like myself, reading the article and looking at the sample art David Roach provided was an exciting and at the same time humbling moment.

At the time I would have said I had at least a passing familiarity with the major UK and American comic strips. I'd been collecting strip tearsheets and reprints since the 1960s and original comic art since the mid-1980s. I'd read the coffee table books and histories of comic strips. I thought of myself as a reasonably well-informed collector, no Bill Blackbeard by any means, but fairly knowledgeable. But I'd never heard of Carol Day, and it was readily apparent this was a huge gap in my knowledge of the field.

Over the next few months I got a batch of late Carol Day artwork from Geoff West at the Book Palace, and an early example from another collector. When the art came, I showed it to my wife and while she admired it, she wanted to know "What's the strip about"? I had to confess, "I don't really know. I don't think anyone in the US has ever actually read a story".

Since Carol Day had never appeared in America and had never been reprinted, I have to assume other US collectors had experiences similar to mine. Since then I've come to believe Carol Day is the best story strip ever done, and the lack of awareness of it is a sad statement about how neglected David Wright's achievement with this strip has been. How could a strip and an artist this good be so unknown?

Infatuation

For the next several years not much changed, and it seemed the strip would end up as nothing more than a nagging mystery in the back of my mind. I sold a few of the originals I had gotten and commiserated with a few other collectors about the lack of information on the strip, but that was about all.

Then in the fall of 2007, everything changed. Out of the blue I received an email from Patrick Wright that he'd been given my name by another collector as someone who might be interested in buying some Carol Day artwork. The American collector Thomas Ward had become intrigued by Wright's artwork and tracked down Patrick Wright, David's son. Patrick had finally been returned the majority of the Carol Day artwork and was interested in selling it. Once Thomas had gotten the art he wanted, he kindly provided Patrick with some contacts of other strip art collectors he thought might be interested.

Needless to say, I was interested, as Patrick had ensured I would be by sending photos of some sample strips! Patrick and I quickly struck up a warm email relationship and once I'd gotten a number of pieces of Carol Day art from him, I was completely infatuated - I wanted every piece of Carol Day artwork I could afford, and I wanted to scan and preserve this incredible body of work before it was scattered around the world. Spending money I shouldn't have, I bought everything I could and Carol Day took over my life. I was completely infatuated.

I think it's generally true that people first fall in love with Carol Day because of the visual appeal of the art, and the first character that rivets their attention is Carol herself. The gorgeous blonde fashion model and her circle of work and friends was a perfect vehicle for Wright to indulge his love of drawing beautiful women in beautiful clothes and settings. A casual survey of Carol Day provides an endless variety in the portraits of Carol that will capture the fancy of any reader.

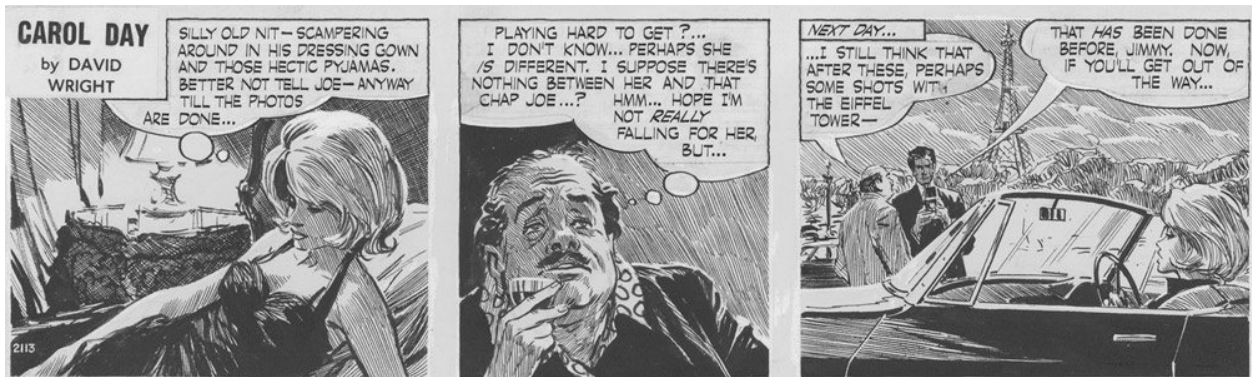


Figure 1. Carol Day Portraits Through the Years

Carol is far from the only beautiful woman in the strip. The others are usually brunettes, but not always, to contrast with the blonde Carol. Here are a few from the various years of the strip – Blanche Teviot (in Lance Hallam), Gillian Vane (in Problem Child), Nora Lovell (in Paris Episode), Angela Ford (in Face Value), Sue Lomas (in Shadow of Suspicion), Iris Slingsby (in Jack Slingsby).



And the strip is full of sex appeal. Any random walk through Carol Day art reveals David Wright's love of drawing sexy situations and poses.





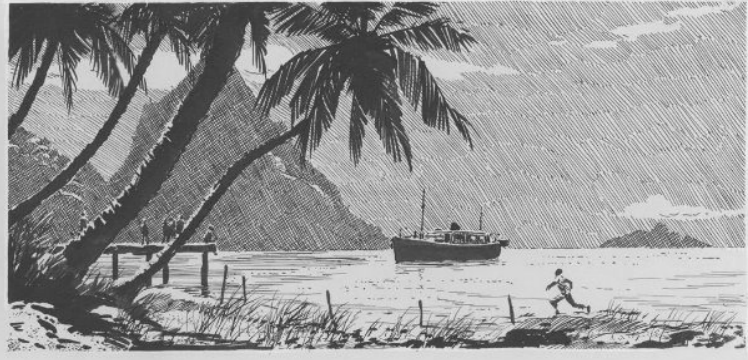
The same is true of outdoor scenes and parties. Wright would often relax from his commercial work by painting watercolors of the landscape, and landscape and seascape form a striking part of the Carol Day art.





CAROL DAY

by DAVID
WRIGHT



Wright's touch for dramatic and atmospheric moments is equally fine.





While not everyone believes as I do that Carol Day is the best story strip ever done, I don't think there's any arguing that it has some of the most beautiful art the medium has ever seen. The instant visual appeal is strongest in the early work where Wright's fine eye for detail, delicate shading and cross-hatching, and masterful handling of light and shade make the art instantly recognizable as extraordinary. But there are many remarkable moments throughout the strip's run that any tour through the art will uncover.

Grand Affair

Though the enchanting visuals are the initial appeal of the strip, what turned Carol Day from an infatuation into a grand passion is that the strip and the character are so much more than eye candy. When I finally had a chance to sit down and read it in the fall of 2007, it was clear I was in the presence of much more than beautiful art. I was experiencing a masterpiece of the medium. At that point Carol Day became a life-long love affair.

This isn't the place to for a lengthy critical discussion of Carol Day, so I'll just encourage you to look past the fantastic art and dig into the stories and characters. What I found was

- tightly plotted stories set in the real, recognizable world
- 3-dimensional, often psychologically troubled, characters with dysfunctional family relationships
- an absence of easy answers and happy, tidy endings
- minor touches that add a great deal to the texture of the strip, for example the surprisingly blunt observations of characters about each other, particularly Carol. Another example is Wright's habit of casting people from his family and daily life or the movies as characters – for example his son Nicky as Ian Carr in Ebb-Tide, and Burl Ives in Caribbean Captives.

The universe of Carol Day is not a benign one. Most situations don't resolve happily for everyone or even most people. Carol doesn't smile and laugh a lot – in fact it's so rare that when you encounter an episode in which Carol expresses joy it immediately stands out. Most characters have serious psychological problems and dysfunctional families. Difficult relationships between siblings are the norm. Treachery abounds. Jealousy, greed and self-interest drive many situations. In short Carol Day doesn't live in a neat and tidy soap opera bubble where problems get worked out, relationships get back on track, the evil get punished and the good rewarded.

The somewhat dark universe of Carol Day stands in stark contrast to the major American strips of the time, such as Leonard Starr's On Stage, Stan Drake's Heart of Juliet Jones, or John Prentice's Rip Kirby. It's easy to see why the strip was considered too sophisticated for American readers of the wonderfully drawn but bland story trips that were its US contemporaries. Perhaps Carol Day's universe is more comfortable to today's comic readers than those of the 1950s and 1960s, as we have embraced the "grim and gritty" style of comics.

Once I really understood I was in the presence of a little-known masterpiece, I started thinking about how to help Carol Day get the recognition it so richly deserves. I had some practical considerations as well since I knew I couldn't afford to keep all the art long term no matter how much I wanted to, and I had to figure out how to sell some of it.

Promoting awareness of the strip and selling some of the art promised to be a major challenge. Most strip art collectors like to read the stories their art is from. And comic strip art always sells best if collectors have some nostalgic feelings for the strip. Since Carol Day strip never appeared in the US, there wasn't any nostalgia for it here, and since it hadn't been reprinted there was no place where readers could read the stories. A website that presented complete stories, so fans could get the context for the art that was for sale and that could help generate enthusiasm for the strip, was the obvious solution.

Then the problem was source material for the stories. Only a few complete stories were part of the art I got from Patrick Wright, but fortunately Patrick still had most of the scrapbooks David Wright had compiled as Carol Day was being published. David was very conscientious about clipping each day's strip from the newspaper and putting it in the scrapbooks, and Patrick agreed to allow me to scan them and present the stories on the Carol Day website. My wife agreed to do the technical work implementing the site. With all that in place my wife and I started designing the site.

www.carol-day.com went live in early 2008, and over the next couple of years we presented all the stories for which we had source material. Patrick's set of scrapbooks wasn't complete, so we are still missing a few stories and for several others we have only photocopy source. As new fans came on board and more people became aware of the site, many people have generously contributed scans of tearsheets, original art and other Carol Day and David Wright material. Without help from the users of the site, for instance, we would not have been able to present the first Carol Day story.

This past summer we started on the next phase for Carol Day. We wanted to accomplish several things: upgrade the presentation wherever possible with scans from original art instead of tearsheets, stay digital, provide an easily downloadable version so people could enjoy the strip offline, and ask for a nominal fee from readers to help compensate David Wright's estate for its generosity. After some investigation, it seemed the most versatile, widely used, widely available and simplest platform was Amazon's Kindle since they have a Kindle app for all the major tablets and the Cloud Reader for reading on Mac and Windows PCs. We decided to make each story its own ebook, and in late August we released the first one, *Last of the Line*. To date we have 9 stories available, and we'll continue until once again all the stories for which we have reasonably good source material are published.

Whenever I go back to Carol Day, it's still the art that catches me first and then the characters and stories absorb me. After 4 years, I see no signs of the end of this affair. I continue to reread the stories, seek out the art and other David Wright material, and welcome the opportunity to meet other fans or get new fans hooked. It's a lot of fun.