



PROFILE

Bart Simpson

He is yellow. He is short. He has between seven and nine spikes on the top of his head. He is (at his worst) corrupt and evil; at his best mildly annoying (such as when he makes crank calls to Moe's Tavern and asks for Al Coholic or Mike Rotch). He appeals to kids (who want to be just like him) and adults (who know their kids already are just like him).

He's Bart Simpson of TV's anti-family, *The Simpsons*, and it's hard to remember how Western culture functioned before he came along, dispensing ludicrous catchphrases like "Don't have a cow, man", "Whoa, mama!" and...but I'm sure you know them all already.

However, despite his unique style, Bart Simpson is not the first cartoon Bad Boy to wheedle his way into Western thought. One is reminded of the turn-of-the-century adventures of Buster Brown, a colourful comic strip created by R F Outcalt for William Randolph Hearst's *American Sunday* newspapers.

Unfortunately for Buster, however, conventional morality at the time meant his wickedness had to be punished at the end of every episode, and the last frame of his weekly strip had to contain a vow never to be bad again. A more recent 'bad boy' is Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes*, a remarkably imaginative comic strip in which the inquisitive would-be

delinquent Calvin wreaks mayhem on the world with the aid of the tiger Hobbes (who lives only in his imagination). Unfortunately, Calvin and Hobbes too often find themselves becoming whimsical and sentimental about each other; it's a daydream, not a nightmare. Bart—who's an animated cartoon, true, but with roots more in comic strips than in the Hanna-Barbera world of recycled plots and ninth-rate jokes—has no such constraints placed on his behaviour, and we can confidently expect him to grow up to be as much of a no-hoper as his dad Homer.



If I had to sum up my favourite memory of Bart it would be the time his sister Lisa found him taking a photo of his "butt" with his spy camera. However, there are numerous charming aspects to his character; take, for instance, these selections from his "Bottom 40": "The fact that Otto hardly ever lets me drive the school bus"; "Being tried in court as an adult"; "Stories with morals at the end"; "Cartoons with redeeming social messages".

Cartoonist Matt Groening came up with Bart and his family when the producers of the faintly bearable *Tracy Ullman Show* came to him with a proposal to turn his comic strip *Life in Hell* into short animated sequences to plug a few gaps in the live-action show. Fearing that a negative reaction to the cartoons would hurt *Life* in

Hell, Groening (rhymes with "raining") created a new set of characters based loosely on his own family—all except Bart who, one assumes, is based on the 'national character' of the USA.

The short *Tracy Ullman* spots were sufficiently successful to allow a series to go ahead: and the series was, of course, an instant success. It took over from where *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* left off and cornered the cartoon-based merchandise market for six months or so. (I'm told that shops in Los Angeles these days are full of remaindered Bart merchandise—the Americans, after all, have had a year longer than us to get used to *The Simpsons*). As I write this I am supping coffee from a Bart Simpson "Don't Have a Cow Man" mug; I've got a bumper sticker (don't own a car), a key ring (too big to fit in my pocket) and a copy of the quarterly magazine *Simpsons Illustrated* on the table in front of me. That's a tiny proportion of the *Simpsons* merchandise available. The T-shirts are the most popular; I've seen whole families wearing them. (Buster Brown had the same problem. In 1905, after being presented with a Buster Brown-endorsed suit, sled, stockings, camera, books, breakfast set and games, he is seen running to check into the *Nervous Prostration Hospital*.) Of course, there's a lot of unofficial Bart merchandise, too—the most creative being the bootleg "Black Bart" T-shirts. Depicted wearing Public Enemy-style medallions and smoking reefers, the black version of "the little dude who's crude when he shovels his food" says unimaginative but at least positive things like "Being black is cool, man".

And what does Bart make of all this? Well, apart from being called on to sing for the *Simpsons Sing the Blues* album, he seems to be blissfully impervious to it all. On the other hand, someone as totally self-centred and egotistical as *Springwood's* youngest delinquent could only assume that the rest of the world was as interested in him as he is.

David Nichols