THE COMFORT OF ALEX

There must be very few adults these days who, upon buying the daily paper, immediately turn to the comic section: those that do are probably self-consciously trying to rekindle some childhood pleasure. Most people probably don’t even read the comics anymore, and certainly the days are long-gone when a paper’s popularity stood or fell on its comic section.

More fool them. Even when the mainstream comic sections aren’t funny (that is, most of the strips most of the time) they’re an essential "take" on the western world—even dross like Archie. In fact especially dross like Archie.

But there are at least three strips appearing in Australian newspapers which are extremely entertaining in themselves. Two of these—Calvin and Hobbes and Alex—deal with self-centred males struggling to keep their own comfortable corner of an uncaring environment. Both characters inhabit worlds where nothing is as it seems to be—until reality, the inevitable punchline, comes to shatter their—and our—perception.

Alex, by Charles Peattie and Russell Taylor, is the only strip run by the Australian Financial Review. It originally ran in the London Independent, until its creators defected to The Daily Telegraph last year. The strip is also regularly collected into 'best of' volumes, the most recent of which is Alex IV (published by Fairfax at $12.95); the authors also produce the similar Celeb for Private Eye under the pen-name Ligger. Alex is their foray into the world of so-called high-flying big business; while Alex himself never comes down from his high-flying with a bump (except for one episode where he literally crashes into a rainforest) there are few around him who escape his self-centred greed. Alex is an entirely unsympathetic character who, not very surprisingly, seems to spend his impeccable existence with his eyes closed or at least wincing. But those around him do not present any sort of contrast or relief; he’s a ruthless man in a ruthless environment. Appearance is everything and success very much an end in itself (though being seen to succeed is possibly even more important).

Peattie and Taylor are effective satirists, but like many daily cartoonists they also rely on an ingenious formula to get their point across while giving the regular reader some anticipatory enjoyment. Often, a four or five-frame strip will be an extended pun, so cleverly constructed that the reader will go back and trace the way

Newspaper cartoon strips are an underrated pleasure, thinks David Nichols.
it was set up purely for the enjoyment of its structure. Many of Alex’s fans, one assumes, would find this more satisfying than actually laughing.

Alex’s world is one of prestige and priority: being seen to be busy and always being in meetings (or “meetings”). Because there are no genuinely sympathetic characters (in *Alex IV* he has an affair with his secretary Wendy, who perhaps lacks the evil intent of the rest of his associates, but who nevertheless would need more verve to present a lighter side to Alex) it takes a persistent reader to see beyond the grim satirical punning of the strip. Luckily, most *Financial Review* readers got where they are today by being persistent.

The back cover of *Alex IV* sees our hero, having driven to a secluded spot with the luckless Wendy under the cover of night, turning instead to the *Financial Review* itself. How many executives would adore the idea of their colleagues pointing to that picture and cackling, “That’s just what ___ would do!”?

Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* has all the complexities of Alex - but with an unfortunate syrupy tinge of boy-and-his-tiger sentimentality which probably explains its popularity in paperback reprints (of which *The Indispensable Calvin and Hobbes*, Warner Books, $17.95 is the most recent). Where Alex’s drawings are ordered and neatly rendered, Watterson seems happiest depicting Calvin and his toy tiger Hobbes falling through the air. Hobbes takes on a distinct personality alone with six-year-old Calvin; whenever another human being intrudes, he instantly turns into an ersatz Tigger doll. Thus, Hobbes’ personality is entirely Calvin’s alter-ego; where Calvin expresses disgust for schoolfriend Susie Derkins, Hobbes’ eyes fill with lust.

It’s easy to imagine a senior citizen—or a five-year-old—in Duluth, or Dumphries, or Dubbo, cackling away at *Calvin and Hobbes* yet giving up in disgust or confusion at the cynical nature of Alex’s world. Yet there is a very un-Middle American strain to Calvin which contrasts well with Alex’s abject terror at being socially or financially disgraced. “I don’t want to learn teamwork!” Calvin screams to his father, after having been coerced to join the baseball team. “I don’t want to learn about winning and losing! Heck, I don’t even want to compete! What’s wrong with just having fun by yourself, huh?” Encouragingly non-conformist sentiments from an artist who, apparently, was producing pro-Republican editorial cartoons before getting his “big break” in newspaper comics.

As in Peattie and Taylor’s punning denouements, Watterson tends to show Calvin’s adventures through a Calvin-eye view until reality creeps in for the final frame: alternatively, we might see the real world up until the punchline, where Calvin has set up a fantastic situation for his own devilry (such as carefully building a city of snowmen so he, as tyrannosaurus rex, can pillage and destroy it!)

Where this imaginative play in place of the three Rs will get Calvin is probably an irrelevant question—because he is unlikely to ever get older than six, and he and his parents are trapped forever in their respective roles and at their respective ages. But anyone who saw the *Simpsons* episode in which Bart—for whom Calvin was undoubtedly a forerunner—becomes a Supreme Court judge must surely have cause to wonder.

All in all, things are looking good for the newspaper cartoon in the 90s—especially when you add a third work of genius to the list of those currently running in Australian newspapers. Brian Kogler’s *Thin Ice*, which can be found in the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph*, has only been running a short while, but it’s a classic. Who can resist a single parent polar bear who makes her living writing romance novels and a cast of snowmen? How you respond to that glittering invitation surely says a lot about you. *D A V I D  N I C H O L S* has edited teen magazines. He only likes reading comics and is so starved for them he sometimes even resorts to drawing his own.