



So...podcast – Episode #24 Drawing the Talk Simon Kneebone

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- John: Greetings. John McKenna, So...podcast. Simon Kneebone, cartoonist, illustrator, and a good friend, Simon, you are. We've known each other for many years, haven't we?
- Simon: That's right, yeah. I can't remember how many, but it's a long time.
- John: Simon, thanks for coming onto the show. Let's start by exploring in really basic terms what is a cartoonist and an illustrator?
- Simon: Yeah. It's quite a wide range of things that could fall into that basket. Many people who think cartoons instantly think of cartoons on television; that's one part of it – not that I do that. A cartoon really can be anything, but for me it's a way of getting an idea into a picture that can involve images, can involve words. Ideally, a cartoon only survives for 3 or 4 seconds in someone's head, so it needs to communicate really effectively and quickly. And it has to be fun; fun and humour I think helps it work, and it can convey serious messages or something just frivolous. An illustrator is sort of a cartoon that is more artistic, maybe, or just illustrates in a more gentle way something, a feeling. I think cartoons and illustrations, for me, all involve conveying something human; it's fairly general and very vague, but to me that's what it is.
- John: You talked about it only staying in your head for a couple of minutes. Could I respectfully challenge that and say I think cartoons stay in people's minds longer than words you might read in a paragraph because they can really stick in your mind.





Simon: Ah, that's good because the 3 or 4 seconds I got from experimenting with kids in a cartooning class, I got them to read a small comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, and with a stopwatch I timed how long it took them to read it, and it was 3 or 4 seconds to read this small three panel comic. So, I said to them, "If you're a cartoonist, you've got 3 or 4 seconds to say something to your reader. You're not going to do the Mona Lisa or some highly beautiful, elaborate painting, you just want something that works in those 3 or 4 seconds. If you're lucky and somebody cuts it out and sticks it on the fridge or it sticks in their mind forever, you've really hit the jackpot cartoonist-wise. Otherwise, people have moved on. Or a cartoon that is illustrating a text or something might lure people into reading more about that issue. The cartoon has a function of leading people to want more to find out for themselves what an issue is. And the cartoon might be totally wrong, but they can go and find out for themselves what the facts are.

John: You've been doing cartoons and illustrations for many years. When did it start and how did it start?

Simon: You know, as everybody would say, as a kid you like drawing and mucking around. Yesterday I was working with some grownups who said, "No, we can't draw. Don't ask us to draw anything." I said, "You were kids once, you must have been able to draw. What happened? Where did it go?"

I think for me, I remember in grade 1 I drew a helicopter. I'd never seen a helicopter – this is in the 1960's. I did a giant swirl as the blades, and the teacher came around and said, "That looks so messy." And I think that could have been the turning point where I said, "I can't draw," but I for some reason thought, "No, that's good. I'm going to stick with this," which doesn't make sense. But I just mucked around.

At uni, I drew drawings just for fun instead of studying in the library. Somebody remembered that, and she was working at the Port Adelaide Central Mission, and they had an unemployment project.





She remembered that I did these drawings and said, “They want somebody to do some comic strips and cartoons to communicate ideas about unemployment to young people. Go down there and see if you can help them out.” So, I did, and that was, for me, a turning point because the Port Adelaide Central Mission had a lot of good people there.

The senior social worker really pushed me, I guess. He said that cartoons need to have a purpose, convey information, connect with the viewer. That was my job in there, was to communicate with young unemployed people. So, it got me thinking about how do you connect with your audience, how do you convey information? So, that was quite important to me, and in the same time, the people in the mission sent my work around and I got jobs or bits of work with various other welfare agencies. My first cartoon ever was published by ACOSS. I remember picking up the pamphlet and seeing the cartoon in there. It was a pretty terrible cartoon, but it made me sort of feel, oh, that’s a bit weird, but I was pretty proud.

John: That’s good. ACOSS is an organisation in Australia, is that right?

Simon: Yes. It’s the Australian Council of Social Service which is a very large umbrella organisation for welfare organisations, community organisations. So, yeah, it was a good thing to be involved with them, and all this led to other things. ACOSS had a national conference in Sydney that I was invited to attend as a cartoonist. So, I was thrown in the deep end of cartooning at a week-long conference that had a daily newspaper or newsletter, and they wanted cartoons to say something about the day’s progress. I was pretty naïve, and I had no idea, but a lot of people helped me. So, drawing cartoons at a live event was another great experience on the road to something.

John: I would call cartoons and illustrations multilingual, if I could use those words, simply because people who don’t speak English still get an idea what the message is.





Simon: Yeah. The ideal cartoon works in 3 or 4 seconds, but also doesn't trip the reader up or the viewer. So, the fewer words the better, the more the image can convey the message, can say something. So, ideally, if it doesn't have any words, it doesn't require language, the picture can say it all. So, ideally, a cartoon should be totally international – global.

John: Exactly. The word political correctness we hear a lot, and you and I both know it's about messages that are acceptable in some cultures and not acceptable. How does a cartoonist illustrate a work in the environment where political correctness is there, it does exist, how do you work with it?

Simon: Yeah, that's interesting because political correctness as a term is disparaged as something that's not valued or not encouraged. For me, political correctness is some of the good things, good values, good ideas, being useful, helpful, considering other people, being empathic; these, to me, are all political correct ideas. To sling off at political correctness, it doesn't sit with me that well. So, I think it's, yeah, cartoons are often able to criticise and poke fun at a lot of things that people hold, values they hold and whatever, but sometimes I think cartoons can go a bit too far and ridicule stuff that is valuable that binds people together and is more communal rather than selfish. I think a lot of people that accuse others of being politically correct are being a little bit selfish and finding their selfishness has been trampled on a little bit.

John: Any type of communication can be misinterpreted, whether it be a spoken word or an article. I'm wondering if there's any examples where you've done an illustration and behind your mind this is meant to be the message, but all of a sudden from a different area someone's come up to you to say, "You know what, this is my takeaway, and I think it's very different." Can you share an example of that?





Simon: There have been some; I think I've blocked them out of my brain. I can remember one where I did a whole series of cartoons on something where I got it totally wrong. Well, there was one: in the very early days of websites and things I was a bit naïve, and somebody said, "We'd like a wizard. Design a wizard for selecting a range of options." I took it literally and I drew a wizard, but a wizard was really a concept of, you know, a series of buttons or whatever on a website, so I stuffed that one up. They never came back to me, of course.

John: Right.

Simon: Yeah, these days I learnt from that to really use other people. You rely on other people as editors or people who can just look over your shoulder and you can show them what you're working on and see if you are on the right track, if there's anything that can be misinterpreted. I think you probably do get a bit alert to things that might be misread, and you steer clear of those.

John: You and I have worked together on numerous jobs, numerous campaigns with the National Disability Insurance Scheme website accessibility. I would like to acknowledge now that we've done this all by telephone where you and I have been on each other into the phone and I've tried to describe and you've ... I think my point here is you're a really good listener because you're able to take words and put them on paper, and that must be a skill in itself.

Simon: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's something that I've developed by starting out quite shy or retired or something. Listening is really important. And even working at conferences it's good not to be prepared, to just go in with a blank mind, pick up on the issues people are talking about, and then try and think of how would you express these in a picture. And the same with our phone conversations where you briefed me with issues that I knew not a lot about, but you





obviously knew what you were trying to say. So, that was good, I think, to start from a blank slate in some ways, get the ideas into your head without prejudging them or forming them in anyway, and then try and wrestle them into a picture. It's good to hold back rather than say, "Well, you should be thinking this," or, "This will make a better picture, but it won't say much."

John: Sure. Let's do our best over a podcast to describe the journey. What goes through your mind when you're about to do an illustration? Because obviously you would talk to someone on the phone or meet somebody that tell you what they want. I think from memory you've told me as your listening you are scribbling at the same time. And when I say scribbling, you've got pen and paper and you're drawing things, or are you making notes? How does Simon Kneebone do it?

Simon: Yeah, I think it's very much like being at school or at university or something. I take notes in words and sometimes sketch little pictures, whatever comes into my head. I find it really handy to write it all down because once the phone call is finished, I can't remember anything, but reading the words brings it back. So, I'm lost without a bit of paper and a pen to write stuff down as somebody fills me in on an issue or something. I guess as you're listening to stuff, images come into your head on what might be an effective way of conveying that. It all comes from listening to, I guess, someone's passion for their issue, what they're trying to get across; not so much in information, as in how powerful this issue is, how strongly this should be presented, things like that affect what sort of images you want to use, whether it needs to be a strong image, a subtle one. And you want to keep in mind the viewer, the person you're communicating to. I've often thought you start from what you want in their head and work backwards to what you're going to draw. So, rather than drawing something that is going to look good, you want something that will work in somebody





else's head, will resonate, will strike a chord and help them think about the content of your cartoon.

When I was at the Port Adelaide Central Mission, one of the things they said, every week I'd take a little pack of cartoons and show them to them, and I'd think some of them were funny, and they would sort of go through them and say, "Oh, that's a bit ...". They said, "Each cartoon has to have a purpose. What's your purpose? What are you trying to say?" And it took a while for me to absorb that message, but it sort of sunk in that, yeah, what are you trying to say, how are you going to say it, and it only works if the reader or the viewer gets it. So, as a cartoonist, you're the link person between the John McKenna and the audience of John McKenna's writings or whatever that the cartoon is going to illustrate.

John:

I think that's a good point. Yes, you are a bit like the conduit or the messenger. You're formatting something from words into drawing which is great. Obviously, the world right now, we are receiving information from YouTube, we're all on our phones and watching things. Are you seeing any trends where cartoons are staying around and people still appreciate the value of them compared to something visual or moving pictures?

Simon:

Yeah. I think, well, mainstream cartooning, the newspaper cartoons, the editorial cartoons, are in a bit of a crisis in some ways because newspapers are disappearing, and I think it's a challenge for cartoonists to work out just how do you transfer your ideas into something that will attract people on a page on a screen. And colour and movement is important, but colour and movement can just be entertainment rather than really saying much. So, I think it is a big challenge. I don't really know quite if anyone's hit on it. And of course, compared to working for newspapers or magazines, there's no money in doing things online because unless you've got some great following, you're going to be doing it for free. Which is fine for getting your messages out, and that's the main point, but I think there is a struggle to work out what is going to work online





compared to what works in a magazine or a newspaper or a book or whatever; that's a challenge.

John: We spoke earlier about numerous campaigns, whether they be the environment, Indigenous rights, human rights. Does Simon Kneebone have any particular passion that you are proud of and that you want to share with the world?

Simon: All these issues, there's so many issues around, but I suppose in my mind they come together as all human issues. They're all dealing with people trying to get on with their lives, make lives, in difficult situations possibly, and receive or be able to enjoy decent human rights. And in some ways, these issues are blended together in some ways. The languages and the conventions of communicating and whatever are slightly different, but the humanness binds them together in my mind.

So, as cartoons, a cartoon can I think take on a whole lot of issues at once and point out universal sort of things to say about our lives and global issues. I suppose I've had one really successful cartoon which was about refugees coming to Australia, it was. It was a picture of a warship stopping a boat full of refugees and someone on the ship says, "Where are you from?" And someone on the boat full of refugees says, "Earth."

It was a very simple cartoon, but it took off in Europe where of course there was great problems with refugees coming across the Mediterranean to European countries. And I'm surprised that that cartoon, it was so simple and rudimentary, and even when I think of how I came up with it, it was just a fluke, I suppose. But it does say a lot about any issue. We all come from Earth, and we're all trying to get a decent life.

John: Exactly. Simon, I'm hoping that that picture can be seen on your website, can it, the one you were just speaking about?

Simon: Yes, it's there, tucked away.





John: Good.

Simon: And some of the background to it, yeah.

John: Would you like to share with the world your website, please?

Simon: Yes, it's simonkneebone.com.

John: .com. You've got some great pictures there. I've really enjoyed this conversation. I think if there is a message you might want to share with anybody, and I've got some friends who will do the little scribble on a bit of paper while they're waiting for a bus or a train or they're at a meeting and they're getting bored, there's different words for it – doodling, scribbling, having fun, just taking their mind from pen to paper. For those people out there who do that, what message ... could they be a cartoonist, could they be an illustrator?

Simon: Look, I got into this because I couldn't draw fantastically well, and I thought, cartoons, you don't have to draw well. I started in the era of Bruce Petty and Michael Leunig, two Australian cartoonists who almost specialised in drawing really badly or basically, but I liked that because, getting back to the 3 or 4 seconds, it works. It didn't look like you'd put hours into the drawing rather than just concentrating on getting the message across. And so, for me, cartooning was doodling, and I think for lots of us, doodling is a great way to remember stuff just as taking notes at school, at university, jotting down stuff when you're on the phone, all of that can work.
I've always kept a diary of just stuff, but by reading an entry, it can bring that whole day back just from a few words. And you think, I'd never remember that day if it wasn't for those few words on that page, and now I can remember it; doodling can do that. You can capture something that will jog something in your head and bring back that idea. I think it's not many steps on to producing a cartoon





that can jog ideas in other people's heads. I think that's where cartooning works, it just sparks off something in other people's heads and hopefully they forget about the cartoon but they get on with their own thoughts, their own motivation to change things, make things better, have a better day.

John: That's what we want, Simon, a better day, all of us. Thank you so much for coming onto So...podcast. We did talk earlier, and I guess I'm putting you on the spot again now, but I'm hoping that we can organise something where people can see something, one of your illustrations perhaps on my website about our conversation. If they want to see what you do, they can look out for that on johnmckenna.com.au.

Thank you, Simon Kneebone, for having a chat with me on So...podcast. It was fun. I thought it would be great, based on our friendship and our connection. Thanks for being with me today.

Simon: Thanks, John. It's great to chat again. Always fun.

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