



## **Cathy Bids Farewell: A Q&A with Cathy creator Cathy Guisewite**

### **Why have you decided to retire Cathy now?**

CG: I've loved doing the *Cathy* comic strip and feel so honored to have had my space in so many papers for so long. This career has been a miracle – it let me turn every anxiety into art, be paid for it and connect in such a deep way with millions of other women.

But after almost 34 years of meeting newspaper deadlines, I'm facing personal deadlines that are simply exceeding my ability to procrastinate any longer: a daughter who's starting her last year of high school, who I want to be able to be there for completely while I still get a teeny vote...beloved parents I want to visit more often...and a biological clock that's hitting 60 and panicking about doing everything else in life I haven't had time to do yet.

### **How did the strip come about?**

CG: My career is the triumph of the pushy mother.

In 1976, at the height of the Women's Movement, I was feeling the full confusion of succeeding at the "new" dream of having a fabulous career in advertising, but failing at the "old" dream of having a relationship. I send little stick-figure sum-ups of my frustrations home with letters to my parents.

My mother – who'd said everything I touched since birth was "good enough to be published" – insisted these new scribbles could be the start of a comic strip. When I refused, she marched to the library, researched comic strip syndicates and typed a list of who I should approach. It was only when she finally threatened to send the work herself with a "cover note from Mom" that I send a package to Universal Press Syndicate, the company at the top of her list.

Instead of the rejection letter I was planning on, they sent me a contract. They said they loved the emotional honesty of my submission, and that they were confident I'd learn how to draw if I had to do it 365 days a year.

### **When you started, could you imagine Cathy becoming such a huge hit?**

CG: The first day that *Cathy* ran, I spent most of the day hiding in the ladies room of the advertising agency in Detroit where I worked praying that no one would read the newspaper. Even though I'd been frantically working on learning how to write and draw a comic strip every night and weekend for seven months, I hadn't told anyone except my immediate family that I was doing it.

The first strips were so personal and vulnerable at a time when women were celebrating such new confidence and empowerment. I thought I was the only woman in the world who came home from a day in her brilliant career and ate a pint of ice cream because Mr. Wrong didn't call.

I couldn't believe I'd ever shown my drawings to anyone, let alone that they were being published. Couldn't imagine that anyone felt the same way. Could never, ever, have comprehended that *Cathy* would have so many biologically unrelated, deeply connected "sisters".

## **How much of the strip throughout the years has been autobiographical?**

CG: Pretty much, the more humiliating the admission, the more autobiographical it was.

The seven different sizes of jeans in one closet...the three-year, \$75/month membership to the gym that I went to twice...the begging my mother to return the delusional New Year's Eve outfit because I couldn't face the saleslady again: all me. The visions of total organization, efficiency and clarity: not so much.

I didn't want to call the strip "Cathy" because I wanted to at least get to pretend I wasn't writing about myself. Universal Press thought that people would relate to it more personally if they saw the main character and I shared a name. In keeping with the complete lack of decision-making skills that fueled my whole career, the strip stayed "Cathy" because I couldn't decide on another name in time.

## **How do you go about creating the strip on a daily basis? What is your creative process like?**

CG: My creative process has almost always started with me dumping my purse out on my desk, praying I'd written some partial joke on a fat-free energy bar wrapper, and concluded with my deadline just hours away and me desperately calling my sister, Mickey, to ask if she thought any other woman every experienced what I was writing about, or if it was just something women in our family did. Mickey's the only person on earth I ever tried strips out on before they were published.

I've never once had that experience of just being out and about and having fabulous ideas flood into my brain. I can only write if I'm sitting in a room completely alone, with my phone set to speed-dial my sister.

## **Who are your influences?**

CG: I never would have created Cathy if I hadn't grown up reading Peanuts. It never would have occurred to me to work out my anxieties and insecurities in four little illustrated boxes. Charles Schulz not only opened the door for my whole career, but saved me thousands and thousands of dollars in therapy.

## **What has been your favorite part of doing the strip?**

CG: I've loved creating something that helps women feel they're not alone.

I've loved creating something that men will never completely understand.

I've loved getting to connect with women where we live and aren't usually seen: weeping on the floor of the swimsuit dressing room...planted in front of the freezer at 2:00am...stuck behind the desk in the fabulous powersuit we couldn't zip after lunch...standing in the ladies room rehearsing "date" conversations or trying to blow dry the part of the outfit that just fell in the toilet...and that secret special place in our brains that we go to where we can believe, just for a little bit, that the right new pair of sparkly, stiletto sandals will fix everything.

## **In what ways have you seen the strip impact others?**

CG: I'm extremely proud that my work's been hung on the world's most important museum: the refrigerator door. It doesn't get anymore significant than to be displayed that close to someone's food.

My favorite letters have been from mother/daughter teams who have written to tell me the strip has helped keep them speaking to each other. My own mother, incredibly, still cuts out my strip and sends it to me with little notes saying, "See? We're not the only ones."

Besides the fact that I work alone, I'm a really solitary person by nature. Except for family, I go huge stretches of time without seeing or talking to anyone. When I have gone to book signings or given speeches, it's been incredibly moving to me to meet, and feel an instant connection with, women who have followed my work.

I've had women hug me with tears rolling down their faces and tell me how reading the strip helped them through horrible, lonely times in the exact same way that writing the strip helped me. The women who have shared that with me have changed my life. I've gone home so inspired...and then, of course, so utterly panicked that I'll never be able to create anything else that will live up to the high regard these beautiful women have of me.

### **What are your favorite Cathy storylines, and why are they your favorites?**

CG: I've loved getting to scream for all women at the swimwear designers...to defend our need to have 15 virtually identical, but completely different pairs of black shoes...to question the male brain's ability to remember every play of a football game twelve years ago, yet forget that Valentine's Day is on February 14...to explain concepts: Why chocolate eaten directly from the freezer has fewer calories because of the extra energy the body expends trying to not rip the fillings out while eating it. Why a salad with 8 ounces of ham and cheese and 2 cups of croutons has 500 fewer mental calories than a sandwich.

I've loved celebrating the giant tangle of mothers and daughters.

I've been criticized sometimes for reinforcing negative stereotypes of women by writing so much about weight and shopping, but to me these subjects are a rich microcosm of the extra pressures and expectations that women live with every second of the day. Now, with so many powerful, positive role models, they're also a microcosm of the feelings of isolation women feel when we try to live up to 10 images at once and can't. In what universe would men one second of life trying to squash themselves into "sexy workout wear"?

### **Can you offer any insight as to how the strip might end?**

CG: The strip will end with me weeping at my drawing board, mascara and anti-aging serum dripping all over the blank page...one hand clutching a pen, one clutching a spoon...on the speakerphone with my incredible parents, snapping at them for calling with their loving support right when I'm so busy being hysterical...frantically rethinking my whole decision...

....Oh. You mean how will it end in the paper? If I had the sort of brain capable of planning two weeks ahead I never would have been able to create this strip for the last 34 years.

### **Looking forward, what are you hoping to do with your free time?**

CG: For almost 34 years I've dealt with every frustration by writing a comic strip about it...so I imagine for quite awhile there will be a little trail of crumpled-up drawings following me wherever I go.

Besides finally being available 24/7 to hover over my 18-year-old daughter and parents and drive them insane with my love, attention and opinions, I want to pursue my lifelong goal of cleaning out the trunk of my car.

Most of my huge fantasies at this age involve the storage room: re-packaging the last 60 years into neat little plastic boxes... labeling and backing up five crates of miscellaneous family videos...all 45,000,000 digital and non-digital photos edited, organized and popped into pretty albums.

When I even think about it, I start seeing the words on the page. I know my next creative project isn't far behind.

### **What would you like to say to your fans?**

CG: I'm profoundly grateful to Universal Uclick and the newspapers for taking a chance on me, standing by me all these years and allowing me to have this incredible career.

To the readers who have cheered, cried, screamed, stomped, rallied, wailed, and started all over again and again with me, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will always be there with you in the great dressing room of life, reassuring you you're not alone, cheering you on to march out into the world with your head held high, and giving you permission to go by way of the food court.