

INSIDE AURORA: Conventional Wisdom

By Scott Johnston

What do you call a collection of cartoonists: a scribble? A Jest? An editor's nightmare?

I'm not sure if there even is an official term, but when they get together, I would call them a lot of fun.

Earlier this month, the Association of Canadian Cartoonists met as they do every two years. This time around, we ventured to Sacramento where we joined our American cousins, plus friends from Malaysia, New Zealand, Nicaragua and other countries. Over the course of four days we socialized and enjoyed presentations on a number of wide-ranging subjects.

You might think it was all discussions on font types, shading techniques, evil editors, and how to draw Justin Trudeau, but in fact, only one of those topics was touched on.

This was when a cartoonist from Pittsburgh told of how he was fired from his job of 25 years due to his newspaper's new editors refusing to let him draw uncomplimentary Donald Trump cartoons.

Another illustrator gave a very moving illustrated talk on losing his house and all his possessions during last year's devastating fires in California. This was based on a series of cartoon-like sketches he had made in the days following the event.

An internationally known cartoonist provided an update on his ongoing battles for free speech in his native Malaysia, where his political cartoons about the government resulted in charges of sedition and the potential for him to spend 43 years in jail.

In his words; "In a country with no media freedom, cartooning is the only medium we have. No dictator can withstand laughter." It was terrific to meet him.

But the subject matter that week-end wasn't all serious. There was a humorous look at Canada/US relations, entitled "Wall Sounds Pretty Good?", and a presentation on the importance of local cartoons, with a focus on Ontario.

In a very entertaining session that was open to the public, a "cage match" was held with four teams representing the US, the US (there were a lot of Americans present), Canada and a mix of internationals.

Taking suggestions of wide-ranging subjects, verbs and people from the audience (eg: Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Hindenburg, kissing and beer) the teams had 60 seconds to create the best cartoon incorporating all those themes.

After several rounds, the Canadian team, who managed to also include a hockey reference in each of their cartoons, and who had a brawl on stage with one of the America teams that dared to include hockey skates on Vladimir Putin in one of their cartoons, was declared victorious by the audience.

At the closing gala there were a series of awards. Recognizing the close ties with our Americans colleagues, the Canadians presented a new award of "Honourary Canuck" (the plaque featured a beaver lazing in a Muskoka chair holding a beer and a small Canadian flag), to a surprised and honoured recipient. No doubt it will take pride of place alongside her Reuben Award and Pulitzer Prize.

My friend Graeme MacKay from the Hamilton Spectator was deservedly recognized with the Townsie Award as the Canadian English language cartoonist of the year (the French winner was not in attendance, and will receive their award shortly).

The next day we all went our separate ways, vowing to meet again in Ottawa in 2020.

As always, I left a little more enlightened, and a little more inspired.

As for my new cartooning friends from around the world, one thing I made sure they all took away with them, whether they liked it or not, was a newfound knowledge of the Ontario town of Aurora.

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