

To my uncle Rudy
and my cousin Terry.

They know why.

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introduction

By Kenneth Hite, LHN

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It's customary, when writing these introductions, to discuss one of two topics: How great John Kovalic is, or how well Dork Tower captures our common experience of geekery.

Well, duuuuh.

Anyone who has spent any time at all with John, whether thirty seconds getting his autograph at a convention (but good luck keeping it down to thirty seconds, what with the lovely impromptu sketches and jokes and gracious statements of thanks — hey, Kovalic, hurry it up, already, you've got a line here, remember?) or hours of drunken palaver in a cheap casino bar in Vegas talking about the slurry of goody two-shoes folderol he calls his politics, already knows how great John Kovalic is. And anyone who hasn't, doesn't really need to know it, unless you're reading this introduction while you're in line waiting for John to sign this book, and wondering why the damn line is so slow.

And if you're a geek, or, as John prefers to call his — and my — tribe, a dork, you'll see how well Dork Tower captures almost any aspect of geek culture from movies to TV to computers to (*sigh*) gaming, just as soon as you finish reading this introduction. Prepare to be amazed at seeing your thoughts flash back at you from the skull of a muskrat. Prepare to wallow in your inner Igor. Prepare to spend a lot more time in much longer lines waiting for Kovalic's autograph, as more and more geeks find out who their bard is.

Instead, I'm going to talk some comics. Dork Tower has gone from a gag-delivery system to an interlocking set of real, complex (but somehow gentle) stories about identifiable human emotions and reactions (emotions and reactions other than craven greed, I mean). This change has run in harness with changes to Dork Tower's structure. John began with a true mastery of the four-panel gag strip. His classic method is to set up (and deliver) a joke, but at the last minute (usually in the last panel) add a twist or an extra line of dialogue that throws the whole strip back into relief or, at least adds a fully unexpected punch line to the bit. Johnny Hart used to be a wizard (so to speak) at this (he may have invented it; he's old enough), and Bill Watterson did it in most of the best Calvin & Hobbes strips. But (usually) Watterson nested this dual punch-line bit comfortably in a two-character world. John does it with six characters, spun in the narrative air like juggler's plates. Now, I'm not saying John is better than Bill Watterson. (But wouldn't it be funny to see John's face if I did? Humility battling with gratification battling with the urge to refute me.) But he's building a world that has roughly thirty times the possibilities that Calvin & Hobbes did. And he's changed his structure to meet these possibilities: multi-page stories, characters seen (and seeing) through different lenses and idioms (to match his strip's many markets, perhaps, but also because he can), overlapping dialogue and thematic parallels. The legendary Dork Tower #11 (collected in Dork Shadows, if you're still in line reading this and can sneak off to add another book to your stack) shows how well John can make this work, as does the "Clubland" story in this book.

Let's go back to those six characters. Dork Tower began with Matt and his gaming group: four Dorks. One could (and I'm sure John expected me to) draw a number of interesting parallels with the four elements, or better yet, the four alchemical humors of medieval medicine. Matt is obviously melancholic, Igor sanguine, and Carson phlegmatic — which

leaves Ken (with his love of wargames and his pedantic habits) as the choleric one. In this particular volume, all the characters let off a little choler — usually at Igor — demonstrating that the four have grown somewhat beyond such stereotypes. However, like Shakespeare's characters, the Dorks are still types — you can still pretty easily figure out which one of the four you are. (I, unsurprisingly, am Ken, although Ken is not me.) John then added Kayleigh and Gilly, making six. (When he adds another, we can start drawing planetary correspondences, no doubt, and argue whether Gilly is the Moon or Venus.) But he doesn't really have a sextet; Dork Tower isn't Friends. (And thank Zorbug for that.)

John has actually added a triangle (Matt-Gilly-Kayleigh) to his original quartet, with Matt as the overlapping character. (Note, by the way, how this deepens Matt nicely without spoiling any jokes.) The obvious comics parallel is Archie-Betty-Veronica, although hapless Matt winds up without either rather than dating both. (But let me throw out another one: Clark-Lois-Lana. Discuss.) But which one will Matt wind up with? A lazy writer would just make Kayleigh the "bad one" and move on, either to comedy or tragedy. But John's not lazy, so the questions arise. Such as: If Gilly isn't torn up about Matt dating Kayleigh (which she doesn't seem to be — yet), can we really say that she and Matt truly belong together? Can her perkiness withstand Matt's love — requited or not? (Let's be honest — dating Matt might take the perk out of anyone's day.) I want to know. So do you. And we can't know yet, because there's no formula, because somewhere along the way, John started writing about real people. (And muskrats.) And that's something a lot harder, and worthier of lengthy introductions, than writing a bunch of jokes about roleplaying games and movies and otherwise acting like a geek.

But I'll tell you a little secret. What made me love Dork Tower with a fierce, unquenchable, all-consuming fire was the first time I saw John draw the crescent moon in the strip. (There doesn't seem to be a moon in this book, which is a pity, but I'm sure you can find one somewhere — such as page 105 of Understanding Gamers. Oh, do you need to sneak out of line again? John will understand.) His crescent moon has a shadow, you see, on the inside of the crescent — a "bit" lifted lovingly from the greatest comic of all time, George Herriman's Krazy Kat. And then my implacable Ken-like geekery came into play. I called John on his steal on the Pyramid message boards, and his response somehow combined bashful acknowledgement with fulsome praise for both my keen eyes and my good taste in comics. He made me feel like a warm friend, a valued colleague, and a brilliant co-conspirator all at once.

In short, John Kovalic is a great guy, and his comic strip perfectly captures my geek flag.

You might as well read the comics now. This line ain't getting any shorter.

Kenneth Hite

Author of Pyramid magazine's second most popular feature, "Suppressed Transmission."

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