

REVIEW

# Michaelis' Schulz, Schulz's Beethoven, and the Construction of Biography

David Michaelis' *Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography*

(New York: Harper, 2007), 655 pp. ISBN 978-0-06-093799-7. Pbk: \$19.95.

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## I. Introduction

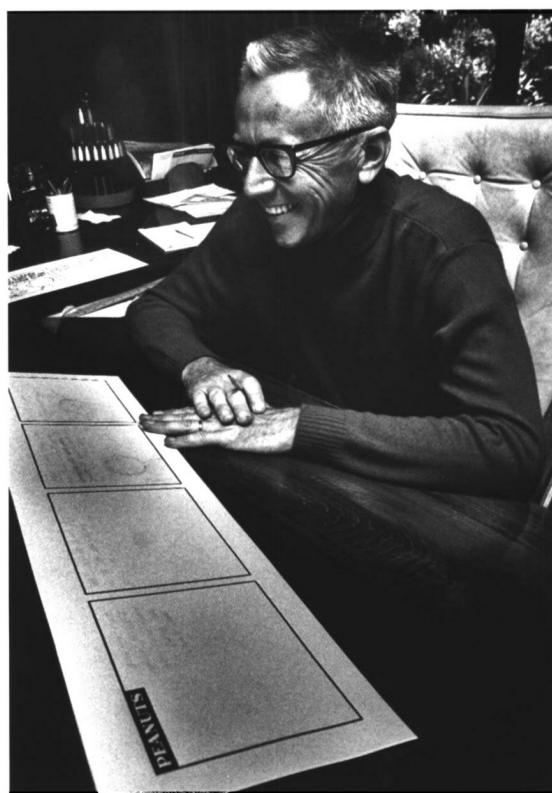
DAVID MICHAELIS' HEFTY BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES SCHULZ has won extravagant praise from esteemed critics in highly regarded newspapers (Rich Coehn of *The Los Angeles Times*), famous authors (John Updike writing in *The New Yorker*), revered newspeople (Walter Cronkite), beloved entertainers (Garrison Keillor in *The Chicago Tribune*), and online pundits (Laura Miller in *salon.com*). No less than twenty-one quotes of encomium fill the back cover and the first two pages of the paperback version, which was released in the U.S. and U.K. in 2008. Michaelis' head must have swelled larger than those of the oversized characters in *Peanuts* as the praise rolled in.

I must confess that my reading, which is quite different, has been inflected by my own relation to "Sparky" (his nickname) as an addict of comic strips since I learned to read, my work as co-curator of *Schulz's Beethoven: Schroeder's Muse* (the joint exhibit of the Schulz Museum and Beethoven Center), having worked with and formed my own impressions of some of the people in the book (especially Jean Schulz), and—perhaps most importantly—by my profession as a historian with a particular interest in the construction of biographies.<sup>1</sup>

I first encountered Michaelis' tome early in 2008 when researching Schulz's knowledge of Beethoven for the exhibit. Turning first to the book's detailed index—no less than twenty-three double-column pages—I was bewildered to find no entry for the composer. Where "Beethoven" should appear—sandwiched between "Beatles band" and "Beetle Bailey"—he was simply missing. Authors rarely index their own books, but Michaelis is poorly served by such a colossal omission: Beethoven is not only a recurring theme in *Peanuts* but was also *the* composer Sparky chose as emblematic of classical music.

At the time I myself was preoccupied with indexing all the Schulz strips that mention Beethoven by name, feature or include his music, or somehow relate to him; I simply didn't have time to index all 655 pages to hunt down what I needed. Accordingly, I laid the volume aside till last fall. And, as it turned out, I'm happy I drafted the exhibit labels without Michaelis' Schulz in mind.

A missing entry in an index is nothing to be peevish about, and I had long ago laid aside my frustration when I began to read. But on the first page of the preface I discovered what makes the biography both invaluable yet seriously flawed. Michaelis uncovered a tremendous number of details that easily warrants the enthusiasm with which his book has been lauded. I'd like to be able to voice equal praise for his armchair psychoanalysis of Schulz's motives and actions without Michaelis ever having met or talked to him, but he's worse at it than Lucy. Does Michaelis have formal training in psychoanalysis or psychology? This question came strongest to mind when I read his unconvincing interpretation of one of Schulz's dreams that the cartoonist reinterpreted in several of his most unusual strips (pp. 496-97). Michaelis also makes over-reaching statements (see below), doesn't bother to provide dates for far too many events and quotes, and makes far too extensive use of unidentified sources.



Photograph of Charles Schulz at the drawing board with a comic strip featuring Charlie Brown (published October 30, 1969) by Tom Vano (courtesy of the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center, Santa Rosa, California)

Ultimately, I find it impossible to reconcile Michaelis' morose portrait of Schulz—"an eternally boyish, eternally lonesome man wondering whether he had been loved" (p. 407)—with the body of work itself. Michaelis' take on Schulz is that the creator of the most famous comic strip of the twentieth century was a depressed and lonely man who couldn't hug his own flesh-and-blood children and stood back from life. I can't emphasize strongly enough that the book tells the biography of *Michaelis'* Schulz, the facts constantly filtered through his simplistic narrative.

## II. Interpreting Biography through Art

One issue readers repeatedly confront in Michaelis' work is the relationship between Schulz's cartoons and his life. It's a question similar to the one Beethoven scholars and lovers have long tackled when trying to puzzle and pry apart the relationship between the composer's life and works. Do Beethoven's compositions reflect aspects of day-to-day life, are they a lens into the construction of the composer's internal world, or do they simply reflect the scope and breadth of the creator's imagination and observations of the world and what it means to be fully human? Or, should works of art be understood strictly on their own independent and abstract terms and merits?

In Beethoven studies, a frequent "test case" is the Second Symphony, composed in D Major, "the key of triumph, of Hallelujahs, of war-cries, of victory-rejoicing."<sup>2</sup> Beethoven sketched the first movement during the fall of 1800; he focused on the fourth movement in the early months of 1802, the year of the Heiligenstadt Testament.<sup>3</sup> Scholars who protest against relating biography to works have argued that this symphony proves their point, since such a positive and exuberant work could not possibly have been substantially completed in the same year as a testament that speaks unambiguously of suicide ("a little more of that, and I would have ended my life") and the darkness of a summer and early fall spent in doctor-ordered solitude ("as the leaves of autumn fall and are withered—so likewise has my hope been blighted").

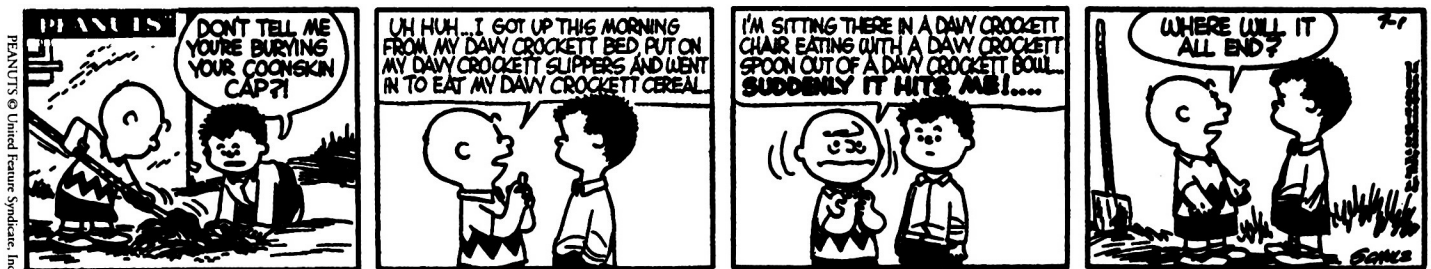
Effective counter-arguments have been suggested, however, on two points. First, since Beethoven had resolved not to commit suicide but to resist his fate, what better key than D Major, the key of triumph? If one can't "win," one can at least don victor's clothing. Resistance and defiance were already clear in Beethoven's letter of June 29, 1801, to his friend Wegeler: "I have already often cursed my creator and my existence, Plutarch has led me to resignation, if it is at all possible, I will bid defiance to my fate, though there will be moments in my life when I shall be the creator's most unhappy creature" (translation mine). And perhaps the famous finale, which has been described not only by Beethoven's contemporaries but also modern commentators as "bizarre, wild, and shrill" (quoting from a review in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* from 1805), can be sympathetically understood as a reflection of Beethoven's heroic struggle and internal battles. Does the fact that the symphony was written during Beethoven's struggles over his impending deafness help us understand the perceptive if negative review in the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* that deplores the symphony as "a gross monster; a stabbed and mightily writhing dragon [*Lindwurm*], unwilling to die, and bleeding to death (in the Finale), continuously thrashing around furiously with its lifted tail"? (In his famous book on the symphonies, Sir George Grove mistranslated *Lindwurm* as snake; dragon is much more apt and descriptive.)<sup>4</sup> While the 1828 reviewer may have dipped his pen too deeply into his pot of purple ink, the metaphors of being "wounded" and "unrestrained" are fitting descriptors of Beethoven's woes and moods in these years.

Similar problems of interpretation face readers of this biography on nearly every page. Can the cartoons be correctly interpreted as Schulz's reactions to his day-to-day life—are they a kind of artistic diary? Are the characters based on actual people? We discover, for instance, that—at a minimum—the character Charlie Brown got his name from a colleague at Art Instruction, Inc. named Charlie (Francis) Brown: Schulz told him "I have a new idea but it involves using your name" (p. 211). The "real" Charlie Brown, who was known as the "good-hearted joker" of the bunch, had majored in art at the University of Minnesota but was a closeted gay man who later suffered from alcoholism, manic depression, and repeated suicide attempts (pp. 260, 549). His later life was the flip side of his earlier days; Schulz described him as "a very bright young man with a lot of enthusiasm for life. I began to tease him about his love of parties, and I used to say, 'Here comes Good Ol' Charlie Brown, now we can have a good time'" (p. 197). Michaelis reports both that Schulz rejected the notion that Charlie Brown was modeled on anything

other than C. F. Brown's name (pp. 259-60) even though C. F. Brown "saw 'so much of Charlie Brown in himself,'" but Michaelis never resolves the question of how much of the man is in the character. An equally important conundrum concerns Lucy. Was she truly modeled on Schulz's first wife or is that too simplistic? Instead, does she represent the crabby, manipulative, and materialistic people of the world, women *and* men? If so, do the *Peanuts* characters act out Schulz's observations and reflections on the people and events in his world and past? Was each one a facet of Schulz's own psyche?

These questions are highlighted because Michaelis "illustrates" his prose with strips that appear to relate to the biographical events under discussion. Sometimes he identifies the dates of the strips; more often than not he doesn't.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes it's clear that the cartoon was based on something that had recently happened to Schulz himself, as in the Sunday strip in which Charlie Brown recounts the story about his father being in love with a "real cute girl" who locked him out of the car as a tease (p. 450). These kinds of immediate connections appear to be evidence that the strip functioned like a diary. But what about the undated cartoons? Why were the dates omitted? Is it because they don't date so neatly from the period under discussion? And what would it mean if they had been drawn *before* the events under discussion?

Two inculpatory examples demonstrate the problem. On pages 336-37 Michaelis describes the early marketing of the strip through product licensing. In 1961 Connie Boucher produced the *Peanuts Date Book*, 25,000 copies of which were sold immediately. Embedded in the text at this point is a strip that opens with Charlie Brown burying his Davy Crockett coonskin cap in front of a bewildered Shermey:



The moral of the strip seems to be that Charlie Brown has been so overwhelmed with Crockett products that they have disgusted him to the point that he wants to be rid of them all. However, besides the fact that the "moral" of the strip contradicts an entire page of Michaelis' prose, the strip was published on July 3, 1955, six years *before* *Peanuts* licensing began in earnest—which explains the disjunction between strip and text.

A similar example occurs on pages 347-48. In the midst of recounting the discussions that took place in 1965 about the choice of music for *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and the fact that Schulz once confessed to a reporter that "I think jazz is awful" and to a trumpet-playing friend that "the only kind of jazz that I really like is that sort that has a trumpet in the combination," Michaelis inserted the following strip. It begins with Schroeder playing the opening of J. S. Bach's Prelude in C Major from Book 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (ironically, a kind of improvisatory classical music that most resembles jazz):



After the cartoon Michaelis snarkily remarks, "Left to himself, Sparky might well have chosen only traditional music for the special (Schroeder plays Beethoven's 'Für Elise' in the school auditorium), but, as with so many other matters in his life as creator of *Peanuts*, jazz would simply happen to Charles Schulz..." (p. 348). Once again, however, the strip, which

was published on February 9, 1952, substantially predates the period under discussion, in this case by thirteen years. And Michaelis again misses the point: Schulz created a strip that demonstrates that Schroeder's anti-jazz shudder—a kind of classical music snobbery common in the early 1950s—is the very reason he's being teased by the other children.<sup>6</sup>

Besides omitting the dates of cartoons that don't match the chronology of his prose, Michaelis also never gets around to a serious consideration and discussion of the relationship between life and art. Instead, scattershot throughout the book, he touches on the subject. Even in a "trade" paperback, it's not asking too much of an author to share how he's going to address such an absolutely fundamental issue. On the very first page of the preface, for example, Michaelis writes: "When Charles Schulz died, he left behind fifty years of clues about his life embedded in his cartoons. . . . Like many artists, Schulz maintained that he could be known only through his creation." Michaelis adds: "Every chance he got, he offered his readers a key: 'If somebody reads my strip every day, they'll know me for sure—they'll know exactly who I am'" (p. ix). But what did Schulz mean by this assertion? Later in the preface Schulz is quoted as saying, referring to the characters in the strip, "These are all my lives" (p. xi). This statement is equally enigmatic, and Michaelis does not get around to giving his answer until hundreds of pages later (p. 258), where he argues that Schulz "gave his wishy-washiness and determination to Charlie Brown, the 'worst side of himself' to Violet, to Lucy his sarcasm, to Linus his dignity and 'weird little thoughts,' his perfectionism and devotion to his art to Schroeder, his sense of being talented and underappreciated to Snoopy."

But are all the characters' thoughts and feelings derived from Schulz's inner world? Or were they based instead on his keen observations of life—especially, for instance, with something like the capacity of children to be mercilessly cruel? Such a conclusion is surely supported by Schulz's statement that "Far more of the strip depends on my observations and memories than it does on either actual present-day experiences in my family" (p. 258). Schulz may have been indicating that the scope and range of his "observations and memories" are apparent in the composite world of his characters; a similar argument could be made for Shakespeare, i.e., that his identity, his thoughts and views, even his consciousness of the world are revealed in the *entire* breadth of the plays and poetry. It's easy to make the same argument for Beethoven: his "observations and memories" formed the basis for the emotional content of his compositions.

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### III. Schulz's Knowledge of Beethoven and the *Hammerklavier*

One of the questions I was trying to discover the answer to in the biography was the date and nature of Schulz's initial exposure to Beethoven's music. According to Michaelis, Schulz first "met" Beethoven through the mother of his closest childhood friend Sherman Plepler ("Shermy"), Mary Black Plepler. Beethoven was Mary's favorite composer, and Schulz liked to go listen to her play. "He used to spend a lot of time in my home,' Shermmy would recall" (pp. 33-34). A second important exposure to classical music occurred in 1947, when Schulz was twenty-three, at the home of a family he had befriended at the Church of God: "He kind of adopted the family,' recalled [Mary's] daughter . . . 'He needed a family and he thought a great deal of my mother.' The Ramspergers were a musical family: Harold, a tenor . . . , was the congregation's musical leader; Elaine studied voice and sang in church. At home their rooms were forever awash in symphonies from 78-rpm records" (p. 169).

The full conversion to classical music lover occurred, however, through contact with his educated and worldly colleagues at Art Instruction in his first two years out of the Army: "The earlier Sparky had been 'impatient with art,' and considered himself 'one of the staunchest opponents of classical music.' To the amazement of Frank Dieffenwierth and his other army buddy, Donald McClane, he knew nothing beyond the Tin Pan Alley canon until he saw a movie about the life of George Gershwin. At their urging, he also tried the waltzes of Johann Strauss. In 1946, he spent the last of his army separation pay on a recording that 'opened up a whole new world for me'—Beethoven's Second Symphony" (p. 191). Once awakened to the joys of classical music, Schulz embraced it completely: "In his first two years back in civilian life he bought more than fifty record albums—Berlioz, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart, and his favorite, the great German Romantic articulator of frustration [sic], Brahms. . . . Sparky remade [his mother's] old room with 'walls of records'" (p. 191). Having experienced first-hand the aggravations of

the 78 rpm format, Schulz enthused over the development of LPs: "This is really something," Sparky exclaimed in January 1949, "an entire symphony on one record!" A landmark was soon reached: "By June that year he had collected all of Beethoven's symphonies on LP except the Third ..." (p. 192).

Almost as important as his exposure to classical music on albums was a game he played with Art Instruction friends: "He got together on weekend evenings with his new friends at Art Instruction to listen to classical recordings and play unorthodox games of hearts. At work in the afternoons, they tested one another's command of the genre. Someone would whistle a theme, pass it midstanza [sic] to his neighbor, and then wait for those at the next row of desks to pick up the line, proceeding around the room in relays until the final note died away. The musically self-educated George Letness took a good-naturedly rivalrous pleasure in trying to baffle Sparky" (p. 192).

Letness was up against someone with a good ear; Jean Schulz told me that Schulz was able to whistle whole themes from memory after going to concerts of the Santa Rosa Symphony. Those earlier games are reflected in some of the strips, as in one where baby Schroeder tries to catch Charlie Brown by whistling measure ten of Christian Sinding's "The Rustle of Spring" ("Frühlingsrauschen"), identified in the strip only as Sinding's "Op. 32, no. 3." More important, however, is the game Schulz often played with his readers when he tested them by including a fastidiously drawn music score into a strip without identifying either composer or work. These are some of Schulz's most sophisticated strips containing music, as they require not only a recognition of the music but also a knowledge of what the music represents (such as in the *Hammerklavier* strips discussed below).

In 1955 Schulz's classical music education began a new phase when his wife "Joyce bought a Baldwin baby grand piano and enrolled in a four-year program at the MacPhail School of Music in Minneapolis, majoring in piano and minoring in violin—four mornings a week, up to two each afternoon." Joyce's parents were of mixed minds about her studies: her father wanted her "to become really good in music" while her mother only wanted Joyce to be able to play "reasonably well." The most important opinion, however, was that of her husband: "Sparky, meanwhile, was 'proud of me,' Joyce recalled, 'and wanted me to be a great pianist'" (p. 308).

One of the most important kinds of evidence documenting Schulz's knowledge and exposure to music of all genres—though Michaelis never discusses it—is his surviving record collection, which is spread among the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center, Schulz's studio still occupied by his company Creative Associates, and his children. As part of the preparations for the exhibit, we searched the collections in the museum and studio for the Beethoven titles in an attempt to match the music featured in the strips with the actual recordings Schulz listened to. We were especially fortunate to discover his recording of the twenty-one year old Friedrich Gulda performing Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Opus 106, which was published in 1951. The scratchy disc, which is included in the exhibit, shows all the signs of heavy use. Gulda's recording and the record jacket notes by Dyneley Hussey, the war poet, art critic, and music critic, may have been the impetus for four strips from 1952 and 1953 that feature the *Hammerklavier*.<sup>7</sup> Hussey's notes state that the work is one of the five late sonatas that represent "Beethoven's ultimate development of the solo sonata," and he added, "The Sonata is, indeed, a mighty work—the largest in scale of all that Beethoven wrote." (See Facsimile 1.)<sup>8</sup>

The Sonata is, indeed, a mighty work—the largest in scale of all that Beethoven wrote. Its special importance is marked also by its dedication to the Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's favourite pupil, who was the recipient also of the great Trio in the same key, the Mass in D, *Fidelio* and the Great Fugue for String Quartet.

The large dimensions of the first movement are due to the great wealth of material used. By the time the double-bar is reached, six important themes have been introduced. These, though varied in mood, are all subtly interrelated, so that they form parts of a vast and beautifully controlled design. The powerful opening theme, a tremendous fanfare of chords repeated twice, is answered by a gentle melody which turns towards the dominant. Its pleading is brushed aside by a third idea, which eventually evaporates in a series of octaves leading to a pause on the dominant. The fanfare then returns, but this time modulates dramatically into D major and so prepares the way for a further modulation in G major, in which key the second subject now appears.

This also consists of three distinct themes, of which the third is a strikingly beautiful *cantabile* melody high up in the treble and ending on a long trill on G. A transition then leads back to the main key and the whole exposition is repeated.

When the end of the exposition is reached a second time, the transition leads to the key of E flat in which the development begins with a fugal treatment of the first theme of the first subject. The *fugato* ends on the dominant of G, but instead of that key returning, the music suddenly switches into the remote key of B major, in which the *cantabile* from the second subject returns. From this the way back to B flat major is made by way of a passage, in which the powerful opening theme is thundered out low in the bass and is answered bar by bar in three upper voices.

Program notes on the *Hammerklavier* by Dyneley Hussey  
from the back of the copy owned by Charles Schulz.

# Michaelis' Schulz

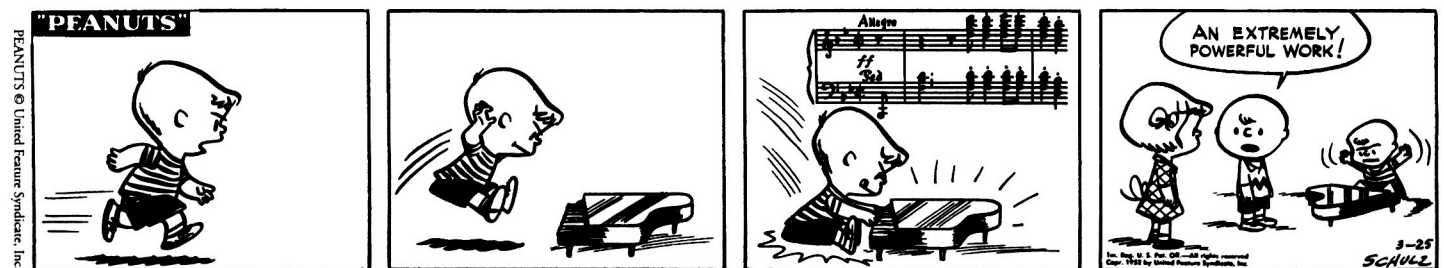
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In the first strip (January 23, 1952), Schroeder launches into the opening of the first movement in the first panel, tongue stuck in cheek. When Charlie Brown, much in admiration of this late Beethoven masterpiece, inquires what he's playing, Schroeder replies with the exact title from the German title page of the first edition (including the correctly hyphenated word *Hammer-klavier*), much to Charlie Brown's bewilderment.<sup>9</sup> Schroeder wildly swings his arms as he continues to play as Charlie Brown, arms dejectedly fallen to his sides, mutters to no one in particular that he feels like he just doesn't belong "around here." (Note Schulz's imitation of German Fraktur script both in the title to the work and in his signature.) Readers who can't read and recognize the music notes or composer and don't read German can't fully appreciate the humor in all its richness.

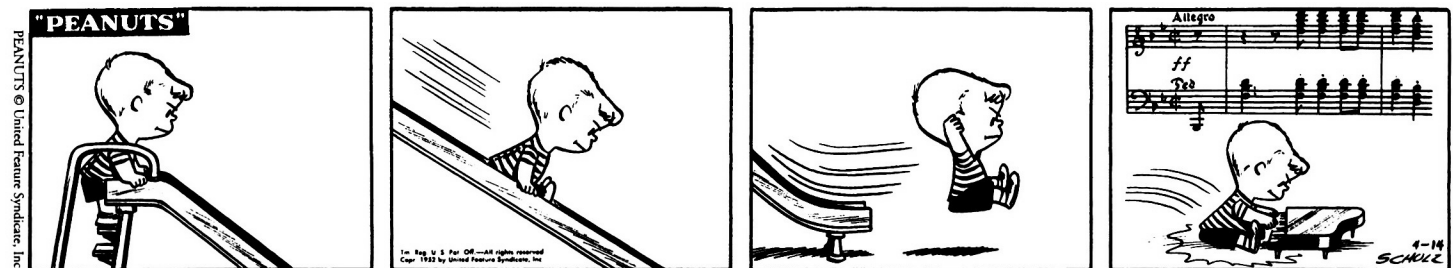


The next three strips focus on the enormous power and difficulty of the sonata, whose challenges were immediately recognized upon its first publication in September 1819. Beethoven himself took pride in its difficulties, bragging to the publisher of the first edition, "Now you will have a sonata that will keep the pianists busy when it is played fifty years hence." By the 1850s the *Hammerklavier* had acquired the nickname "Giant Sonata" because of the exuberant opening gesture, the extreme number of pages in the first edition (fifty-eight!), the technical virtuosity required to master the work and emotional maturity required to express its meanings, and the immense power and large number of ideas it develops. By the twentieth century the sonata had been rebaptized the "Mount Everest" of all piano sonatas.

In the strip from March 25, 1952, Schroeder launches the opening notes by running to the piano, leaping into the air, and landing on the bench (again, tongue stuck in cheek). Charlie Brown, still an admirer, explains to Party that such athleticism is required to begin "an extremely powerful work!" Once again, Schulz did not identify the notes or composer. (In his jacket notes, Hussey twice referred to "the powerful opening theme.")



The next month (April 14) Schroeder decides that a mere running jump to the keyboard does not suffice: the energy required must be obtained from greater heights. Again, Schulz leaves the music unidentified.



The most elaborate strip based on the reputation of the sonata appeared on January 25, 1953. This Sunday strip is concerned not with the energy required for the opening bars but the physical stamina required to play the entire work, which takes between 38-48 minutes to perform depending on a pianist's tempos (this is the same length as many entire symphonies from the classical period). Over the twelve panels Schroeder strengthens his endurance with seven kinds of exercise and a "carb-loading" bowl of cereal. This time he walks, not runs, with fierce determination to his toy piano to begin the first movement. Sweat immediately flies off his head. In Schulz's most extensively worked-out *Hammerklavier* strip, the cartoonist once again did not identify the work or the composer, relying on the sophistication and music-reading abilities of his 1950s audience.



#### IV. Similarities between Schulz and Beethoven

As I read the biography, I couldn't help but notice the following similarities between the lives of these two great creators.

*Both artists came from parents with limited educational training.* In Schulz's case, "Sparky protectively explained away his parents' limitations by emphasizing how early their schooling had been cut off or how Carl had overcome his deficiencies through the redemptive power of work. He liked to tell how his father, with only the beginnings of a grammar-school education, had made the grade as an independent entrepreneur" (p. 68). Schulz's father was a very successful barber who held offices in the local, state, and national levels of the Associated Barbers and Beauticians organization and also contributed to state legislation concerning his field. Beethoven's father, on the other hand, became a failure in the music court and as a teacher in Bonn as his alcoholism progressed, most notably after the death of his wife.

*Both artists had painful adolescences.* As a child and adolescent, Beethoven became intimate with death as he watched three of his five siblings die at an early age: his sister Anna died four days after she was baptized in 1779 when Beethoven was eight; his brother



Franz died at the age of two in 1783 when Beethoven was twelve, and his sister Maria died at the age of one-and-a-half in 1787 when Beethoven was sixteen.<sup>10</sup> His mother also died that same year. The most painful incidents of Schulz's youth were clearly related to his mother's illness and death (see below), which profoundly affected the family when Schulz was in high school. Unlike Beethoven, however, Schulz was "cherished and doted on" by his parents,<sup>11</sup> and he took pleasure in typical childhood sports, drawing, and his dogs. Schulz himself told Jean during his later years that he had been ultra-sensitive as a child to the normal aggravations of being bullied, picked-on, and teased, aggravations that appear frequently in the strip.

*Both men's mothers died when they were young:* Beethoven's mother died of tuberculosis on July 17, 1787, at the age of forty when the composer was sixteen; she had probably been ill for some time. That same year he described her loss in a letter: "she was such a good, kind mother to me, my best friend; oh! who was happier than I when I could still utter the sweet name mother and it was heard, and to whom can I say it now? to the silent image of her that my imagination fashions for me?"<sup>12</sup> Schulz's mother died of cancer of the cervix in 1943 when he was twenty (and just drafted into the Army); according to medical records, she had been ill since he was fifteen (p. 96). Her cries of pain would wake him at night when he was a sophomore and junior, but his parents had decided that he was to be told nothing about the disease even though he observed it ravage her health first-hand. Schulz would later describe the last time he spoke to his mother as the night of "my greatest tragedy." With simple but powerful words, she told him, "Well, good-bye, Sparky. We'll probably never see each other again." Schulz confessed, "I'll never get over that scene as long as I live" (p. 5).

*Both men suffered from abdominal complaints their entire lives.* Beethoven's abdominal problems showed up already when he lived in Bonn, as he stated in a letter to Dr. Franz Wegeler on June 29, 1801: "my hearing has been getting ever weaker during the last three years, and that is supposed to be caused by my abdomen,<sup>13</sup> which was, as you know, already miserable at that time, here however it has become worse because I have been continually affected with diarrhea ..." His death was caused by cirrhosis of the liver and kidney failure that may have been exacerbated by lead poisoning. Stomach pain was also one of Schulz's chronic physical problems. In 1965 he commented, "I've been trying to cut back on all my extra activities until I begin to feel better. If I try to write too many cartoons and write too many books, it results in my stomach hurting, and no one loves a cartoonist whose stomach hurts" (p. 384). One of his colleagues at Art Instruction, where Schulz worked starting in 1946, recalled, "He had indigestion quite a bit. ... I think it was turmoil. There was a lot boiling under the surface ..." (p. 481). Schulz died from colon cancer on February 12, 2000.

*Both men were competitive with most of their male peers.* Addressing Schulz's competitiveness, Michaelis writes, "Walker correctly saw that Schulz was 'competitive with everyone.' Or, as another colleague saw it: 'His sights were set on being great. One of his mantras was: *Be the best.* He was a merciless competitor. He gave no quarter'" (p. 274). When the real life Charlie F. Brown decided that he would not continue to try to be a cartoonist after yet another rejection, Brown recalled that Schulz replied with somewhat biting humor, "Good. That will make one less cartoonist I will have to compete with" (p. 275).<sup>14</sup> Beethoven's own competitiveness is on full display in one of his letters to Georg Friederich Treitschke from 1814, which is at the Beethoven Center: "today I spoke to the chief bass singer of the Austrian Empire full of enthusiasm for a new opera by—Girovez [the now unknown composer Adalbert Gyrowetz], I was highly amused when I thought of the new artistic path that this work will open up for us—."<sup>15</sup>

*Believing in the value and popularity of their works, both men were also competitive about their distribution and were proud of them as a source of income.* Schulz was competitive about the number of papers that carried his strip; Beethoven tried to arrange for simultaneous international publication of his music, both for financial advantage but also to further his reputation in music-loving England. Both men were also criticized for trying to make as much money as possible from their creations, and their attempts to maximize their income were misunderstood.

*Both men disliked traveling.* In Beethoven's case, the fear is partly—but not completely—explained by his growing and eventually complete deafness. In Schulz's case, Michaelis argues that he suffered from agoraphobia (see page 518, for example); Schulz's eldest son Monte argues that Michaelis exaggerates this point,<sup>16</sup> and Jean Schulz believes



that her husband “didn’t have a fear of traveling as such. It was more that he was afraid of getting sick—his upset stomach—when he was away from home.”<sup>17</sup>

*In their middle ages, both men became infatuated with younger women about whom they imagined an idealized relationship.*<sup>18</sup> In Beethoven’s case, the primary documentation appears in the letter to the “Immortal Beloved” of July 6-7, 1812. In it Beethoven spoke of their love only enduring through sacrifice and of wandering abroad until “I can fly to your arms and say that I have found my true home with you and enfolded in those arms can let my soul be wafted to the realm of the blessed spirits.” Whoever the Beloved was, Beethoven never attained his “true home”; the ache of unrequited love resonated in the works written after 1816 (beginning with the song cycle *To the Distant Beloved*). In Schulz’s case, he fell in love at the age of forty-eight with the twenty-six year old Tracey Claudius in March 1970 (p. 457). Though he asked Tracey to marry him, she turned him down. In the words of Schulz’s friend Betty Bartley, “he romanticized everything”; she knew that because he was ‘the kind to walk down the beach with you and say, ‘Let’s run away,’ he was therefore less likely to act on such doghouse impulses. What was more, once the thrill of desire had been unleashed—*Let’s run away*—he preferred to savor its never-realizable potential” (p. 457). Unlike Beethoven and in refutation of Bartley’s assessment, however, Schulz *did* realize the potential of a new relationship: he met Jean Schulz in the fall of 1972 and married her on September 22, 1973.

*Both men have been acclaimed as “universal geniuses” whose creations appear to be timeless and of international appeal. But both men’s works also contain elements that link them to their time, as we should expect.*

## V. Overreaching and Other Errors

Again and again as I read Michaelis as a historian fascinated with biography-telling, I was shocked by Michaelis’ overreaching. A perfect illustration occurs on the first page: “As an adult, he made a habit of asking pointed, even personal questions of whomever crossed his path, and he sought a nuanced understanding of life’s mysteries wherever he went.” Then Michaelis adds the following opinion that he goes on to contradict throughout the entire biography: “Yet he showed *not the faintest interest in comprehending himself and the implications of his work*” (italics mine, p. ix). To prove my point with a few examples: on page 258 Michaelis supplies us with a wonderful example of Schulz’s self-comprehension as well as his self-mocking awareness of the boundaries of his own I.Q.: “I am completely at home with my characters,’ he told Dieffenwirth in September 1951, ‘and can get as sarcastic as I wish, which gives me a sublimation for my desires. (That’s hard to spell when you’re not very intelligent.)” And on page 309, Michaelis quotes Schulz explaining Lucy’s virtues: “Lucy is too sharp for [Charlie Brown], and she is full of misdirected confidence. You have to give her credit, though . . . She can cut through a lot of the sham and she can really feel what is wrong with Charlie Brown which he can’t see himself.” On page 370 Michaelis quotes Schulz saying “You’re drawing mainly on memories. [So I would] just sit there and think about the past, kind of dredge up ugly memories and things like that.” Or “I don’t think that we [cartoonists] are especially happy people. Most of the cartoonists that I know are kind of depressed, or they’re melancholy. I think a lot of us are very melancholy. But from that feeling comes humor” (p. 385). This is a lack of self-awareness?

Other mistakes occur in Michaelis’ analysis of the strips. On p. 247 he writes, “When they are unhappy, children protest—they wail, they whine, they scream, they cry—then they move on. Schulz gave these children *lifelong* dissatisfactions, the stuff of which adulthood is made.” Anyone who takes the time to reflect on this assertion can immediately call to mind either his or her own experiences as a child—in which, yes, dissatisfactions are already fixed—or those of people they know who were already permanently altered by childhood experiences. In fact, is it not that stew of satisfactions and dissatisfactions that creates in large part our personalities?



**Photograph of Charles and Jean Schulz from around 1980 by Giovanni Tromboli (courtesy of the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center, Santa Rosa, California)**

# Michaelis' Schulz

CONTINUED

At times his analysis is tortured. In discussing the relation of *Peanuts* to religion, Michaelis quotes Schulz arguing that: "It's not an evangelistic strip. In fact, I'm anti-evangelistic" (p. 353). After discussing Schulz's membership and substantial financial support of the Church of God in the 1950s, Michaelis concludes: "The cult of Beethoven, the cult of supertime, and the cult of the Great Pumpkin all served to show how the exclamatory avowal of one's beliefs could only place more obstacles between man and God" (p. 353). "Cult" is decidedly the wrong word to describe the Great Pumpkin strips, since cults must be embraced by sects or communities; Linus' *inability* to win over his circle of friends to his belief is the series' main pleasure (regardless of the fact that Linus has conflated Santa Claus with the supernatural squash.) Similarly, supertime is only *Snoopy's* obsession and Beethoven primarily remained *Schroeder's* obsession, though he does all he can to win his friends over to the greatness of the music.

Another example of forced analysis occurs when Michaelis tries to link Schulz's marriage with his first wife Joyce to the ongoing unrequited love Lucy harbored for Schroeder. Michaelis writes: "With his toy piano, Schroeder is building a real wall of music against the world, the frets and bars of sheet music appearing as solid and substantial as the brick and mortar of Charlie Brown's 'meditation wall.' There is no question of his getting married or falling for Lucy; he can happily do without her. If he turns out to be a first-class composer, the music will justify his isolation, and he will be able to hold the world at bay" (p. 369). Michaelis reveals here not only that he doesn't know much about reading music (scores do not have "frets"), but also that he is selectively using the strips to make his points. See, for instance, the macaroni and cheese strip we put in the exhibit: Schroeder clearly plans on getting married in the future, and it is essential that his future wife knows how to make Beethoven's favorite dish, so complete is his identification with the composer.



In fact, as the exhibit proves, Schroeder is hardly ever alone with his music-making: the other characters, including Snoopy, seem ineluctably drawn to the magic of his piano playing.

## VI. Post-review Analysis: Critiques of the Biography in *The Comics Journal*, no. 290 (May 2008)

In a conversation about the biography with Jean Schulz last fall, she mentioned that there were several substantive reviews by five authors in the May 2008 issue of *The Comics Review* that I might want to read. She even lent me her copy, which contains her valuable marginalia.<sup>19</sup> I decided, however, to complete my own essay before turning to the set of reviews, particularly because I wanted to test my own perceptions against those of the reviewers.

As one might anticipate in such a forum, several writers take Michaelis to task for his lack of knowledge about the history of cartooning. The most important error seems to be Michaelis' assertion that the characters' oversized heads and shortened bodies were inspired by a dwarf named Frieda Mae Rich, whom Schulz knew at Art Instruction.

I was especially interested in the fifty-one page essay by Schulz's oldest son, Monte, about the accuracy of the book's portrayal of his father. (I must confess that I get a much better sense for Schulz, his family, and his character from Monte Schulz's long essay than from the biography.) Monte worked very closely with Michaelis for six years and, as is amply clear, feels grossly deceived by the biographer. In his essay Monte gives too many damning examples of errors and distortions to recapitulate, but here are some of his overall conclusions:

- “Knowing my father over any reasonable period of time would disabuse someone of the idea that he was melancholy or withdrawn. Quite the opposite, in fact. Most people who knew him found dad quite engaging and full of enthusiasm for life and its many facets, both wonderful and troubling” (p. 28).
- “David presents specific information, whether in his own narrative or by quoting someone, that is erroneous or misleading. These mistakes are certainly deliberate, because they direct the story he is trying to tell, and lead the reader away from the truth of a given situation or point of view” (p. 37).
- “Which brings me to the largest problem in this biography: omissions. . . . what he left out of the biography was without doubt the larger part of my father’s life, and by doing so, he did a great disservice to his readers who are then left with David Michaelis’ version of Dad’s life . . . . So these many great omissions were conscious, deliberate cuts by Michaelis [from his first draft] to create a book that is, in places, flatly untrue and deceitful in a very obvious and unfair manner” (p. 37).

As harsh as Monte’s comments are, they match the incriminating judgments of the other reviewers:

- “. . . the picture Michaelis paints is only a partial portrait. He emphasizes the dark side of Schulz to the virtual exclusion of the cartoonist’s light-hearted aspect. Upon this single idea—that Schulz was a tortured melancholic—Michaelis has structured the whole book. And he’s given us an ingenuously contrived picture of a man haunted by the childish torments of his upbringing who found a way to live by transforming his miseries into art.”<sup>20</sup> —R.C. Harvey
- “‘Cartoonist’ defined Charles Schulz more than anything else. Sadly, we don’t find the cartoonist much in this book. The cartoonist is there, true enough, but the rhetorical weight of the narrative bends it in another direction, towards the man struggling with his unhappiness. And therefore, the biography, for all the stupendous achievement of its research, for all the cunning ingenuity in the arrangement of its details, for all its beautiful moments, falls woefully short, a flawed and unfinished portrait.”<sup>21</sup> —R. C. Harvey
- “*Problems with book.* A quick summary. It’s too judgmental; the author often makes wildly unwarranted speculations; the picture of Schulz and his parents is too darkly drawn; melancholy is emphasized at the expense of other moods; there is a lazy reliance on ethnic stereotypes; we’re given only a sketchy sense of how earlier cartoonists influenced Schulz; equally skimpy is the account of Schulz’s intellectual interests (the books he read, the movies he watched, the music he listened to, the art he surrounded himself with); and the portrait of Schulz as a father seems seriously mischaracterized.”<sup>22</sup> —Jeet Heere
- “. . . his account concentrates on the first four or five decades of Schulz’s long life, which pretty much guarantees that his increasingly unhappy marriage to Joyce Halverson would receive far more attention than his bucolic second marriage. Indeed, Michaelis nearly devotes as much space to Schulz’s short-lived infatuation with Janell Pulis, an actress who played Lucy on the San Francisco stage, as to his marriage to Jean Forsyth. His narrative discounts the possibility that Schulz’s anxieties diminished in his later years, and that his capacity for emotional growth and love correspondingly expanded. The book’s very structure reinforces the author’s preeminent theme, which is that the creator of *Peanuts* was by nature a wet blanket.”<sup>23</sup> —Kent Worcester
- “In the final analysis, however, an interpretation that reduces *Peanuts* to a work of autumnal melancholy and the humor to a sugar coating on that unpalatable pill is getting *Peanuts* wrong, pure and simple.”<sup>24</sup> —R. Fiore

## VII. Conclusions

Before I conclude, I’d like to reiterate a point I mentioned in my introduction and give some examples: Michaelis uncovered a tremendous amount of information about the cartoonist that is fascinating. The best comes from Schulz himself.

In prescient words that bring to mind the heated debates over religion in the presidential election of 2008, Schulz commented in 1967: “I am fearful of an overly organized church and I am *very* fearful of a church which equates itself with Americanism.” He called it a “frightening trend: people who regard Christianity and Americanism as being virtually the same thing” (p. 351). Equally powerful was his answer to the question of why

he stopped attending church once he had moved to California: "I don't know where to go. Besides, I don't think God wants to be worshipped. I think the only pure worship of God is by loving one another, and I think all other forms of worship become a substitute for the love that we should show one another" (p. 350).

A wonderful nugget of political trivia pops up on page 397: "in the presidential elections of 1968 and 1972, Snoopy was embraced by actual voters as a write-in candidate, prompting the California legislature to make it illegal to enter the name of a fictional character on the ballot." A much more important, and telling, political anecdote concerns the assassination of Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles. The day after his death Ethel Kennedy "sent word through a friend that her children would be comforted if Mr. Schulz would make each of them a drawing of Snoopy or Charlie Brown. On July 1, Sparky sent ten drawings, one for each child (the Kennedy's eleventh child would be born in December), to the mourning family at Hickory Hill. A month later Ethel Kennedy replied: 'It is very cozy to have Snoopy and his pals on our walls, mixed up with photographs of the family, which we think of them as anyway'" (p. 418). When Robert Kennedy Jr. visited Santa Rosa in the 1980s, he remembered the drawings and thanked Schulz for his kindness;<sup>25</sup> Schulz's own childhood loss of his mother must have impressed on him the difficulty of the loss for the Kennedy children.

At times, Michaelis' insights are spot on. He points out, for example, that "Snoopy is the one character in the strip allowed to kiss, and he kisses the way a child does: sincerely, and to disarm" (p. 391). Though I can remember lots of "insincere" kisses I was forced to give my relatives and women at church when I was little, I think Michaelis' insight about Snoopy is fascinating.

So, to conclude this overly long analysis: *beware*. Michaelis uncovered a mass of biographical details but, according to first-hand witnesses such as Schulz's Army buddy Art Lynch, a significant number are either wrong or misinterpreted. Michaelis, not a historian of comics, makes a significant error in attributing the size of the characters' heads to a dwarf rather than the evolution of how children's bodies had been drawn in comic strips, and he makes other smaller but important errors about comic history. Michaelis neglects to discuss Schulz's intellectual and artistic inner life. His summary of the happier later part of Schulz's life is so cursory as to incite the criticism that it is an intentional omission. Schulz's role as father to five children, according to his oldest son, is woefully inaccurate. Michaelis' decision to eliminate material not related to the trope of the depressed cartoonist demanded the omission of so much material that the end result is a "flawed and unfinished portrait."

That's a shame since we really do need a biography that takes the content and creative accomplishments of the strip seriously and accounts for both light and dark in Schulz's life and personality. The five decades of *Peanuts* strips deserve better than to be libeled as the self-referential therapy of a genius exorcising his "own inner anger and discontent at life." That just isn't the strip, and it was not the man.

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## VII. Index of Beethoven Citations in the Biography

- Beethoven, Ludwig van: 33
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## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Jean Schulz (Charles Schulz's widow), Jane O'Cain (curator of the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center), and Dr. William George (President of the American Beethoven Society) for their trenchant suggestions and corrections.
- 2 This is the description by C. F. D. Schubart from ca. 1784. See Rita Steblin, *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1996), 238. In general, Schubart's descriptions most closely match those of Beethoven's works, though there are important exceptions.
- 3 The first movement was sketched in the Landsberg 7 Sketchbook (pp. 37-54), the fourth movement in the Kessler Sketchbook (fol. 15r, 17r-22r). See Douglas Johnson, Alan Tyson, and Robert Winter, *The Beethoven Sketchbooks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 101-08, 130-34.
- 4 George Grove, *Beethoven and His Nine Symphonies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: 1898; reprint: Dover, 1962), 44. The original German text appears in a footnote in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (July 23, 1828): col. 489. It runs: "ein crasses Ungeheuer, einem eingestochenen, unbändig sich windenden Lindwurm, der nicht erstarben wolle, und selbst verblutend (im Finale) noch mit aufgerecktem Schweife vergeblich wüthend um sich schlage ..." I would like to thank Robin Wallace for his assistance with this translation.
- 5 I am indebted to Edna Poehner for looking up the dates to the strips on twenty pages throughout the biography.
- 6 Schulz's cartoon was fairly accurate for a time in which children who were devoted to classical music were not normally enamored of jazz.
- 7 Hussey was music critic at *The Times* from 1923-46 and *The Listener* from 1946-60. He worked with music on the BBC Third Programme and wrote articles under the title "The Musician's Gramophone" for *Musical Times*. There are two additional *Hammerklavier* strips that do not focus on the difficulty of the work. The first appeared on September 13, 1953 (Charlie Brown is teasing Schroeder by declaring that Beethoven is a "big fake" and piano music is not "real music" to get his face to turn three shades of green). The second was published on July 2, 1982 (Schroeder plays the opening of the sonata to eject Snoopy from lying on top of blank music staves).
- 8 The Beethoven scholar Joseph Kerman has argued that jacket and liner notes for sound recordings are some of the most influential and wide-reaching writing that music critics and scholars create.
- 9 The German title page begins: "Grosse Sonate für das Hammer-Klavier ..." There is also a French title page to the first edition: "Grande Sonate pour le Piano-Forte ..."
- 10 There was also a "Ludwig Maria" born to Beethoven's parents who was baptized on April 2, 1769; he died six days later. See Peter Clives' invaluable *Beethoven and His World: A Biographical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13.
- 11 Email from Jean Schulz (December 7, 2008).
- 12 My translation. For the original German, see *Ludwig van Beethoven: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Sieghard Brandenburg, 7 vols. (Munich: Henle, 1996), 1:5, letter no. 3. The letter is no. 1 in *The Letters of Beethoven*, ed. Emily Anderson, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 1:3.
- 13 The German word Beethoven used was *Unterleib*, which may be translated as belly, lower abdomen, or abdomen. See *Ludwig van Beethoven: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, 1:79, letter no. 65: "mein Gehör ist seit 3 Jahren immer schwächer geworden, und das soll sich durch meinen Unterleib, der schon damals wie Du weist elend war, hier aber sich verschlimmert hat indem ich beständig mit einem Durchfall behaftet war ..." Anderson translated the third phrase as "which, as you know, was wretched even before I left Bonn" (*The Letters of Beethoven*, 1:59, letter no. 51); while the meaning is most probably correct because Beethoven goes to say "here" (i.e., Vienna), Beethoven did not specifically name Bonn. The date of the onset of his abdominal problems is an important issue.
- 14 Though this sounds somewhat harsh to non-cartoonists, as Jeet Heer recounts, "as a friend of mine observed, the jape Schulz made is not really that cutting by the standards of most cartoonists." See Jeet Heer, "The Impossibility of Being Definitive," *The Comic Review* 290 (May 2008): 95.
- 15 *Ludwig van Beethoven: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, 3:12, letter no. 699; *The Letters of Beethoven*, 1:449, letter no. 467 (translation my own).
- 16 Monte Schulz, "Regarding Schulz and Peanuts," *The Comic Review* 290 (May 2008): 65.
- 17 Email from Jean Schulz of December 7, 2008. Jean added, "But when he did go, he was tremendously curious and was always observing, asking questions, and appreciating everything around him. And bringing it home to talk about with friends and using it in the strip eventually."
- 18 Both men also had the somewhat unusual habit of using repetition in their love letter(s): Schulz, according to Michaelis, always addressed Tracey in triplicate in his letters: "Tracey—Tracey—Tracey, Dark hair and a perfect nose. Soft hands that are cool and sometimes warm" (p. 452). In Beethoven's love letters to Countess Josephine von Brunswick from 1805 and 1807, he frequently used repetition: "Silently beat only, poor heart—that is all you can do—. For you—always for you—only you—eternally you— until I [am] in the grave only you—" (my translation; Beethoven used the formal *Sie* in each case rather than the informal *du* that he used in the letter to the Immortal Beloved). See *Ludwig van Beethoven: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, 1:247, letter no. 214. The letter is no. 112 in *The Letters of Beethoven*, 1:134.
- 19 Here is one telling marginalia: at the end of R. C. Harvey's review, he writes "David Osborne of the *London Independent* ... observed that Michaelis pretty much advertised his take on the cartoonist in an appreciation of him in *Time* magazine that would later be expanded to make the book—that the genius of Schulz was driven ... by his own inner discontent and anger at life" (p. 105). In the margin Jean wrote, "This should have warned us."
- 20 R. C. Harvey, "The Pagliacci Bit," *The Comic Review* 290 (May 2008): 85.
- 21 R. C. Harvey, "The Pagliacci Bit," *The Comic Review* 290 (May 2008): 92.
- 22 Jeet Heer, "The Impossibility of Being Definitive," 94.
- 23 Kent Worcester, "Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography," *The Comic Review* 290 (May 2008): 98-99.
- 24 R. Fiore, "Getting Peanuts Wrong (or Not Quite Right)," *The Comic Review* 290 (May 2008): 211.
- 25 Email from Jean Schulz (December 7, 2008).