

ICON OF THE MONTH

How the media loved it in July when the Commission for Racial Equality denounced Tintin as racist! How it tickled everyone's prejudices – both those who are suspicious of everything and those who insist that political correctness has gone mad!

In truth, Tintin began life as a little cold warrior. On his first assignment, in 1929, when the right-wing Catholic newspaper *Le XXe Siècle* sent him to expose the villainy of Bolshevism, he was crudely drawn and quite crude in character. Under a cloth cap he sports a ragged fringe, which only freezes into his trademark quiff while he is driving like fury in a stolen open-top Mercedes.

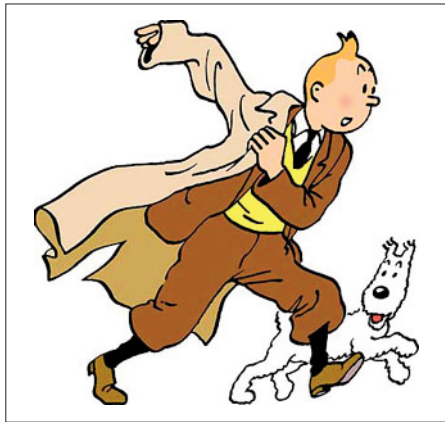
On his notorious second excursion, to the Congo, he treats the natives kindly, like small children – it's his creator, the pioneering young Belgian illustrator Georges Remi, aka Hergé, who treats them appallingly – but cheerfully shoots every animal he sees, except for a rhino which (in the first edition) he blows up with dynamite.

Hergé himself later dismissed these two tales as 'sins of my youth', and Tintin quickly grew up. In his fifth outing, *The Blue Lotus*, the story has scarcely begun before he is pluckily rebuking a fellow Westerner in Shanghai for beating a rickshawman. 'You interfering brat!' shouts the man. 'Brute!' Tintin shouts back, breaking his stick. That's more the spirit!

This is how everyone remembers him, as the archetypal Boy Scout: always prepared for adventure, loyal, intrepid and incorruptible. He fights with his fists, but isn't afraid to use a gun – though as nobody's aim seems to be very good, his battles are as blood-

free as Rupert the Bear's.

An exact contemporary of Mickey Mouse, he never lost his innocence. Though endlessly pastiched, from *The Sex Life of Tintin* to *Tintin in Iraq*, he has never been subverted as the cartoon champions of 'the American way' have been. His foes are the enemies of every decent society: Fascists, drug smugglers, gun runners and forgers. Other, more exotic adversaries, from



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the last of the Inca to (most poignantly) a solitary yeti, turn out to be good-hearted but misunderstood.

Tintin himself may be too good to be true, yet there is nothing escapist about his world. Hergé's extraordinary eye for detail took in all the danger and uncertainty of his times, even if right always triumphs in the end. Beside the humour and intrigue, the black hearts and red herrings and the constant

succession of cliff-hangers, there is acute observation and often shrewd social and political satire.

No wonder the French regard him as a genius (and even as French). No wonder the Tintin exhibition in Paris this year drew huge crowds of all ages to the Pompidou Centre. No wonder the 23 'albums' have been translated into 60 languages, from Latin to Mongolian, and have sold over 200 million copies. Truly, the globe-trotting *gamin* has conquered the world.

But why do we love him so? Perhaps it's because – as his creator did – we can project onto him our own better self. 'Tintin' means, literally, 'nothing'. He is a cipher, with no family, no history, no religion, no sexuality, no politics, no complexity. His round face, like an onion with two black dots for eyes, was described by Hergé as 'the degree zero of typeage'.

We know only that he is a 'world-famous boy reporter' (though only once has he ever been known to file any copy). His age is unknown, though it's reckoned to be 15. His closest friend is a little white dog. He may be surrounded by a cast of eccentrics, but (save for his *toujours démodés* plus fours) he himself is as plain as his wardrobe. When he unwisely wears jeans in his last full adventure, in 1976, he opts for a brown pair, slightly flared.

With a little imagination, he could be us. And this is the key. Tintin proclaims that you don't have to be bitten by a radioactive spider or hale from Krypton to find the strength and the spirit to defend the weak and defy the strong. All it takes is to be courageous and pure in heart. **Huw Spanner**