The Calvin and Hobbes Guide to Daily Life

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edited by Robin Banks

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dedication

This book is especially for Emma Black (a.k.a. zilch, KiraGrrrl, Ann Arki, riot brat, Mama Bear). Thank you for everything. This book — and it's editor! — wouldn't exist without you.

It is also for Jim Bear, Paul F. Maul, Brian Diablo, Lydia Eccles, NietszChe Guevara, Gloria Cubana, Nadia C., F.M. Dixon, August Spies, and all CrimethInc workers, agents, and affiliated cells.

This book is for any kid, no matter what age, who always suspected that there was more to life. Most of all, it is for Calvin and Hobbes — and Bill, of course.

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introduction

I grew up reading Calvin & Hobbes. As a kid, I thought it was the best comic strip in the entire newspaper, right up there with Bloom County. I wasn't old enough to fully appreciate Doonesbury, but I was smart enough to realize that The Family Circus, Blondie, Hagar the Horrible, Beetle Bailey, the Lockhorns, Wizard of Id, and B.C. were all terrible pieces of shit drawn by either washed-up relics or sterile syndicate staffers. And yet Calvin & Hobbes managed to be funny and insightful and original nearly every single day. It was also, hands down, the best Sunday strip.

Later, I found out that Bill Watterson, the creator of Calvin & Hobbes, was a unique kind of cartoonist. Against all odds, against all expectations, he fiercely resisted the licensing (commodification) of his creation. In The Calvin & Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book (published by Andrews and McMeel), Watterson explained his decision. He believed that "licensing cheapens the original creation" — that filling store shelves with a million Calvin & Hobbes knockoff products would make the strip seem like just another commercial tie-in instead of an artistic creation with its own merit. Watterson also felt that taking the artwork out of context (like on a t-shirt or coffee mug) was disrespectful to the medium. He wrote, "I don't want some animation studio giving Hobbes an actor's voice, and I don't want some greeting card company using Calvin to wish people a happy anniversary, and I don't want the issue of Hobbes' reality settled by a doll manufacturer." (One wonders how Watterson was ever able to get Charles Schulz, the king of crappy comic character commercialism, to write the foreword to one of his books after expressing these opinions about licensing.)

I wish I could quote Watterson's arguments against licensing and commercialization at length, because they are not only relevant to Calvin & Hobbes but to all kinds of things in our daily lives. Our romantic desires are re-sold to us as commercials for perfume and diamond rings... our need to escape from civilization is re-packaged as an SUV advertisement... our urge to revolt is captured and displayed as a "rebellious" music video or band t-shirt. Watterson's resistance to this omnipresent onslaught of commodification is noble and admirable. Unfortunately, many people have successfully bootlegged Calvin in many ways — the worst example I can think of is that nearly ubiquitous "Calvin peeing on a logo" sticker that you see in the back windows of pickup trucks driven by extremely stupid people. I imagine that Bill Watterson, whenever he sees one of those stickers, must grit his teeth with rage and physically resist an urge to smash into whoever has the thing on display. (Bill, if you're reading this, remember that it's unhealthy to suppress your natural urges for too long. Go ahead and do it!)

Which brings me to this book. Why create a "new" Calvin & Hobbes book years after the fact — especially an unauthorized bootleg edition like this one? First of all, I am certainly not doing this to make money. If you paid money for your copy of this book, you should have been paying only for photocopying and distribution expenses, because I am certainly not making any money here, nor do I want to.

My main goal was to collect my favorite strips and unite them with commentary about their relevance to daily life. So many comic strips are nothing but cheap gags (and that's OK as long as they're funny — like The Far Side), but Calvin & Hobbes was always about more than just a daily chuckle while reading the newspaper. As Watterson says, "All strips are supposed to be entertaining, but some strips have a point of view and a serious purpose behind the jokes." I wanted to emphasize this point of view, at least in the way that I interpreted it.

Watterson, more so than any other cartoonist I can think of, was highly critical of modern life. You'd have to start reading books by John Zerzan or Wendell Berry to find authors who were more skeptical of widely accepted tenets like the benefits of "civilization," the necessity of work and school, and the irrelevance of wild nature. Watterson may not have been as thorough or thoughtful as more "serious" writers (how could he? it was a comic strip!), but then again, the North American English-speaking world didn't read homilies by Zerzan or Berry on a daily basis — they read Calvin & Hobbes, and I like to think that at least on some level they were

affected by it.

Nowadays it seems like more and more people are willing to criticize everything that we take for granted. I remember Bill Watterson as being one of the first people I encountered who was willing to do this, and I wanted to bring his great work back into the picture with this collection. Not everybody is satisfied with The Way Things Are, least of all my good friend Calvin and his tiger, Hobbes. Thank you, Mr. Watterson, for introducing them to us all.



work



A central theme of Calvin & Hobbes is the omnipresence of unwanted daily duties such as work and school. Calvin sums up this theme in the very first frame. When do we ever get a chance to explore and discover and play, outside of an extremely limited allotment of "holiday" or "vacation" time? Calvin intuitively understands that life should be an adventure yet he falls into the same trap that many of us do, wasting away what little free time he has with mental anaesthetics like television.

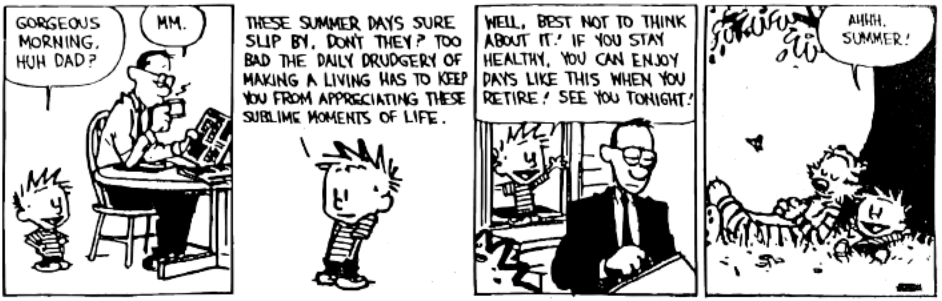


Susie knows that work takes away from your daily life. We spend all day separated from our loved ones, and then when we finally reunite we are too exhausted and stressed out to do anything but heat up frozen dinners and compete for the best "worst day at work" story. Even on our few days off we are spending our time recovering from our jobs and not enriching

ourselves and our relationships. The best we can do is yearn for some vacation time, or secretly hope to get fired.



Should you work more or spend "special time" with your loved ones? It's a dilemma that nearly everybody will face. If you don't spend time with your loved ones then they won't be your loved ones anymore, but if you don't work a certain amount of hours, you won't be able to provide for your loved ones. Working people are always trying to find the right balance between work and family — while facing unsympathetic bosses who feel that the workplace should be the priority.

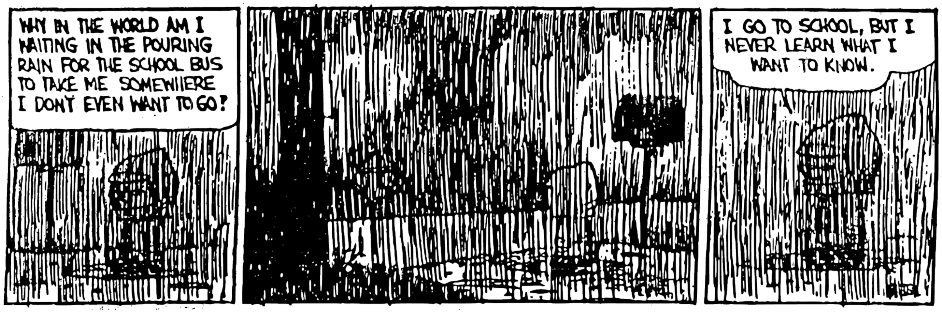


(Does Calvin's dad ever call in sick on days like this? Would you?) Calvin loves to harass his dad about life in the workplace. Calvin's dad works to help support his family, and yet he can't spend time with them; all he can do is wait for the weekends when, if he can successfully lower his stress levels and recover his creative energy, he can try to spend some quality time with his family or absorb the non-work world around him. Is this any way to live?

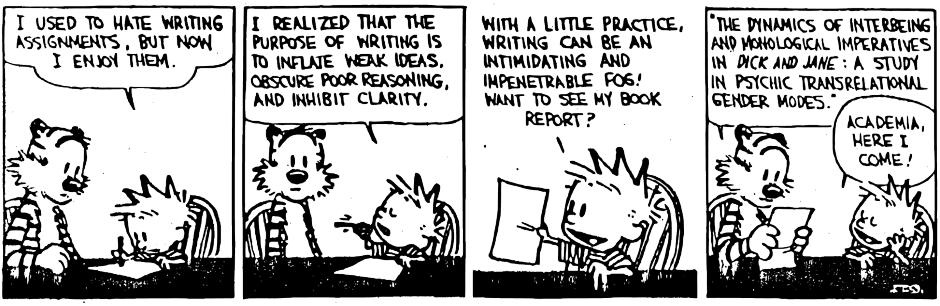


school

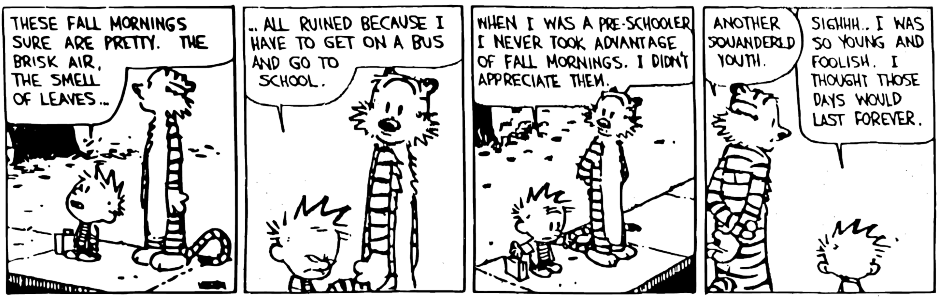
Kids have a natural desire to learn. For example, Calvin (like a lot of kids) is a veritable encyclopedia of facts about dinosaurs, space, the environment, or whatever other topic strikes his fancy. But in school he's forced to learn things that bore him — and the worst part is that



compulsory schooling will probably ruin a lot of potentially rewarding activities for Calvin, like reading and writing. Why not let kids learn what they want to learn, when they want to learn it?



Instead of treating the act of writing as a vibrant means of expression, kids learn to consider it a chore. They fill essays with long words and tangents designed to inflate their page/word count, and when they move into the workplace they do the same thing with memos, forms and reports. Thanks to the arbitrary requirements of compulsory schooling, writing is considered best when it becomes its opposite: an obfuscating mire of depressing jargon instead of a beautiful, powerful method of communication.

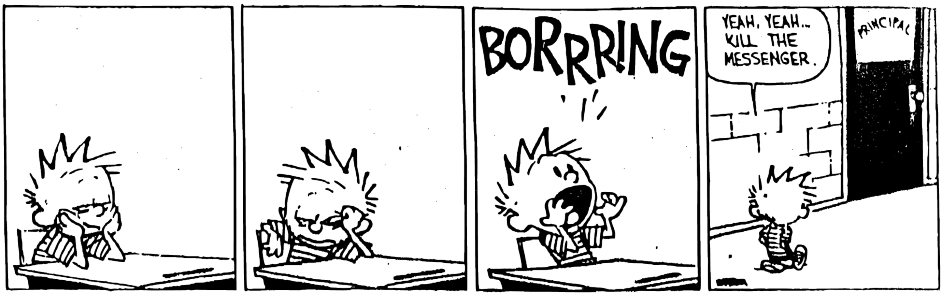


It's the same problem Calvin likes to pose to his dad: it's a beautiful day, full of magic and opportunity, and yet its opportunities are squandered due to forced duties. What Calvin doesn't realize is that he can still take advantage of days like this if he would only talk his parents into allowing him to homeschool — an option we've been taught to consider unthinkable, or at the very least, an option exercised only by fringe extremists.

Calvin sums up the problems with the testing obsession shared by all advocates of forced schooling. Testing utterly fails to reflect the complexity of human beings and their various strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, they only reveal either our capability for memorization or obedience... in other words, our ability to be good workers. And training for the workplace is what compulsory schooling is fundamentally about.



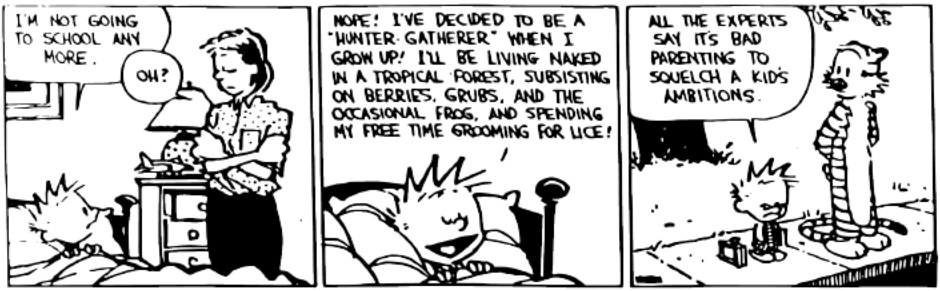
Forced schooling is often the cause of many kids' dramatic, even violent fantasies. We wouldn't be surprised if prisoners fantasized about escaping from prison — why are we bothered when kids (who are natural fantasizers to begin with) create extreme "escape from school" scenarios or even express their desire to destroy their schools? Teenagers cut classes or even skip school all the time, despite the many severe punishments awaiting them. Maybe there is a natural impulse to freedom there that's better off unqashed?



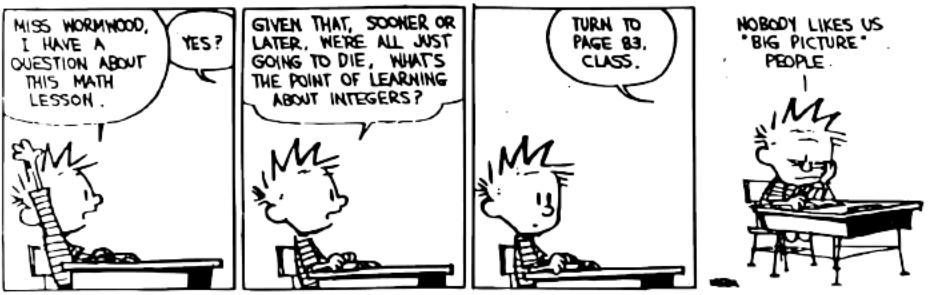
Even if Calvin had expressed his opinion in a more acceptable way, would the response have been different? Not really. He probably got the usual lecture which amounts to something like this: "Learning is boring and life is boring. It's hard work and you better get used to it." This is a lie. Learning, like life, can be an amazing and awesome adventure instead of a deadly dull duty, but not when you're forced to do it in a homogenized, compulsory-education setting.



The newspapers are full of examples of kids who are disciplined for simply expressing themselves and/or criticizing the existing educational/political status quo. Education ought to be about exploring alternatives and new ideas, but because compulsory schooling requires plenty of "law and order," any natural inquiries or critiques of Things As They Are must be suppressed.

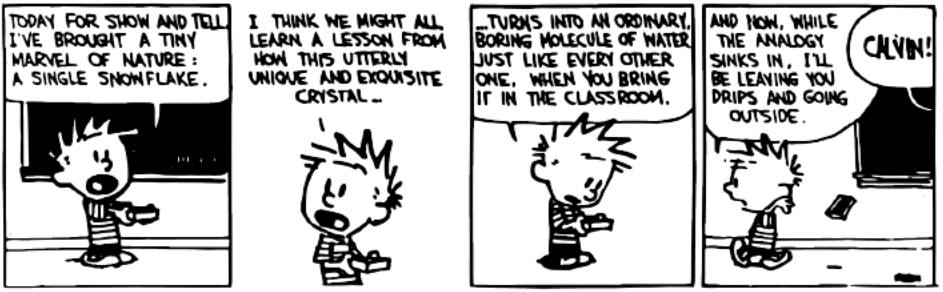


We usually think that "primitives" had miserable lives, but recent research has demonstrated that so-called primitive societies were actually full of relaxation and luxury. Calvin's idea of luxury is running around naked in the woods with Hobbes, splashing in the mud, eating food provided by Nature, and counting the stars at night. The modern idea of luxury is working forty or more hours a week so we can buy trinkets to occupy our "free" time. Which idea sounds more like luxury to you?

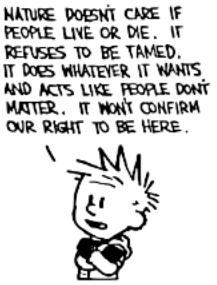


A child may ask, "Why do I have to learn this?" The adult replies, "Look at the 'big picture' — in several years you'll need to know this when you're trying to get a job and survive. But the child may reply, "To me, the 'big picture' is that life is brief and unpredictable. On your deathbed, will it console you to know that you spent your time preparing to live instead of actually

living?" and the adult shall have no reply except for the usual work-ethic platitudes, and perhaps an acknowledgement that the trade of life for future security is a risky one at best.



One of the many drawbacks of forced schooling is that it imposes a single learning method upon diverse groups of kids who may learn different things at different rates and in different ways. The kids who fall behind are considered "slow" or "stupid" when in fact it may be the teaching technique that is inadequate. Kids recognize this, and thus there is great pressure for them not to appear too successful in the classroom. As a result, their behavior is homogenized, and the teachers come to treat entire classes as if they were all the same. Calvin's impulse to resist this homogenization has been echoed by innovative teachers around the world who realize that compulsory education and one-size-fits-all teaching styles are hurting, not helping.

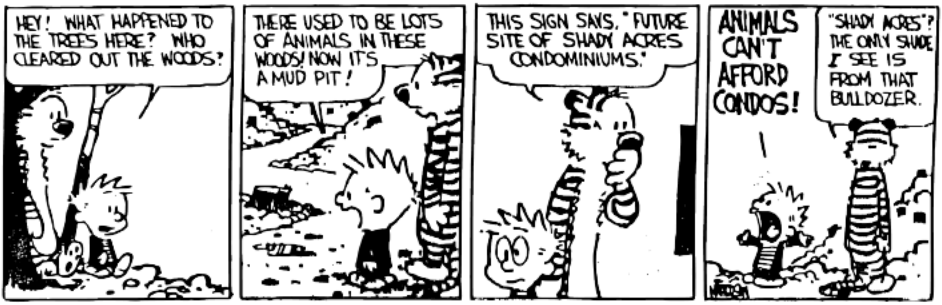


the environment

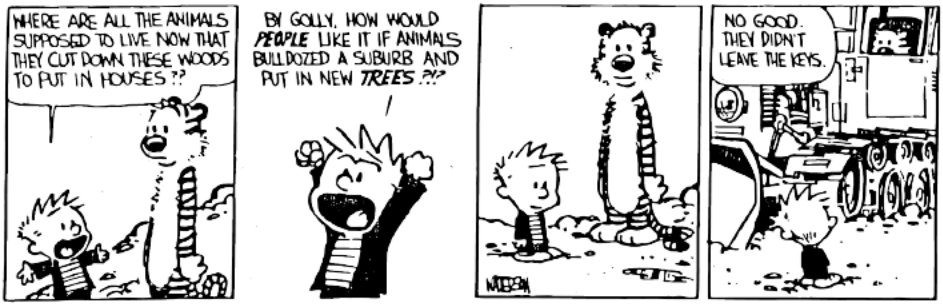


Calvin and Hobbes spend a lot of time in nature — wandering in the woods, making snow forts, splashing in streams — so, of course, environmental issues are very important to them. Hobbes sometimes offers his unique perspective as an animal (an endangered species, no less) while Calvin's youthful indignance often spurs the two friends to action. Perhaps if more of us felt closer to nature, more of us might be inclined to action, too.

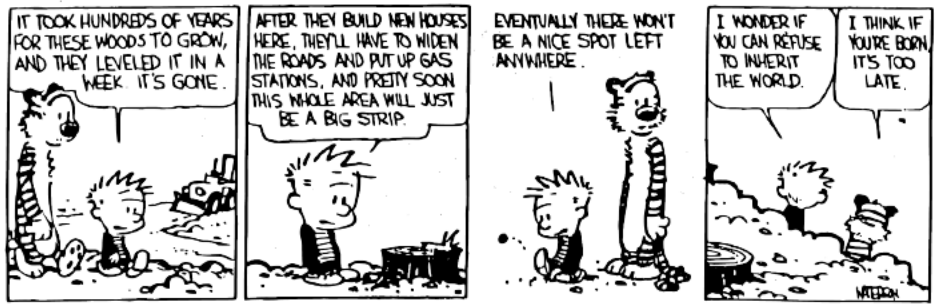
As usual, Calvin and Hobbes see that the emperor is truly wearing no clothes. Have you ever noticed that subdivisions are often named after the things they replaced? In Louisville,



Kentucky, there is a neighborhood named Deer Park that has neither deer nor parks. Several years ago, there used to be a heavily wooded area outside of Louisville where an old monastery named after St. Thomas stood in the middle of a large field. And the name of the subdivision that replaced it all? "The Woods of St. Thomas."



They were this close to taking dramatic action against suburban spawl. If only Hobbes had known how to hotwire a bulldozer! Seriously, though — how can we expect to maintain a decent environment if we continue to expand indefinitely? Each year we manage to chip away at our wilderness and soon we'll be left with nothing. What can we do to stop this — or better still, to reverse it?



Ah, progress. Ponds take decades to form, forests take centuries, mountains take millennia — and yet we humans can destroy them within a relatively short amount of time. Dam it, deforest it, decapitate it... all in the name of progress. But is this really progress? And would we be better off refusing to inherit the world, or working to change as much of it as we can?

The following strip more or less speaks for itself.





the media



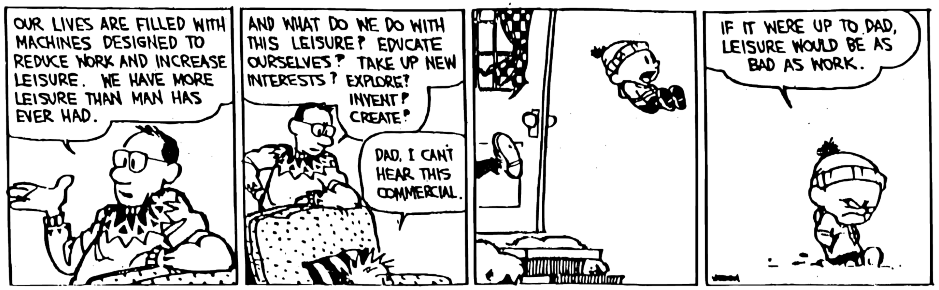
For all his complaining about compulsory schooling, and all of his teasing about the demands of the workplace, Calvin sometimes falls into a very common trap: wasting his "free time" with consumption and absorption of messages urging him to consume even more. As Hobbes points out in another strip (not reproduced for this collection), there are many things we could be doing instead of watching TV, like reading a book, writing a letter, or taking a walk. We could



be playing music, learning a new skill, exploring unfamiliar territory, visiting neighbors, or creating our own comic strips.

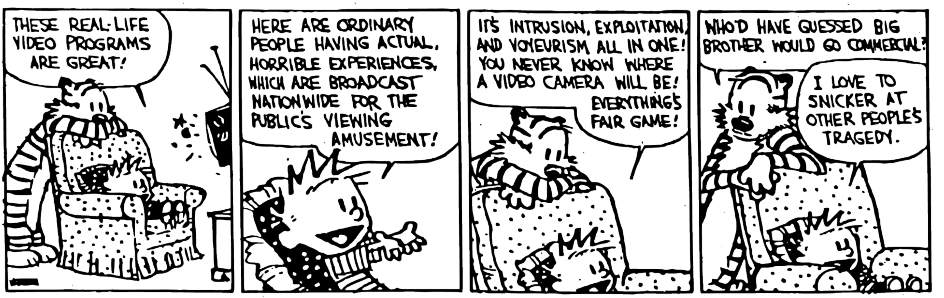


Modern media exist to inform us, it's true — but more and more they are merely informing us about new products to buy instead of informing us about facts and ideas which may affect our daily lives in dramatic, even permanent ways. Every other product introduced on the market is hailed as "revolutionary" — or crucial to our daily lives in some significant way. The examples Calvin brings up (fresh breath, dry armpits, and cola) are by no means exceptions to this rule. Nearly everything for sale is sold as a necessity — without dry armpits or the correct cola, you cannot possibly succeed in this modern world. Do we really need all of this stuff?

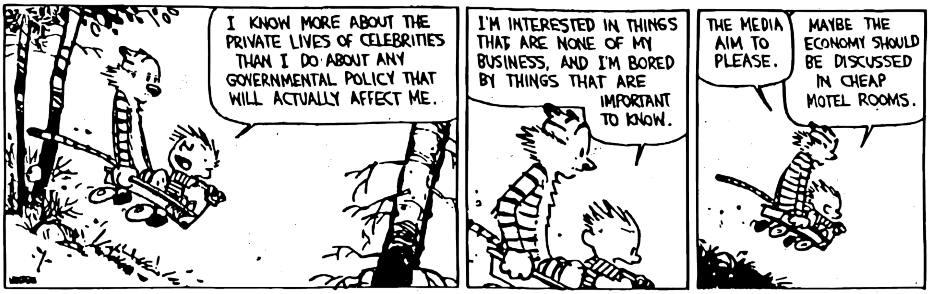


Nowadays we think of "work" and "leisure" (or "play") as two separate events. Our lives are neatly divided into sections — this is the time to work, to earn money, to make a living; and this is the time to play, to enjoy yourself, to be happy and content, to love your family. Humans have lived this way for hundreds of years and so we think of this dichotomy as a perfectly natural aspect of the human condition. But it isn't. For thousands of years, long before the idea of a "workplace" came to be, humans did all of their activities in the same place, with the same people, often in the same breath. Obviously we can't return to a simple hunter-gatherer lifestyle, but we can certainly learn from our ancestors' many eons of successful existence. We don't have to think of "work" as a time for energy and productivity and "leisure" as a separate time for joy and pleasure. But this is how Calvin perceives the world: work is when you get things done, achieve your goals, and strive for accomplishment; leisure is when you "vegout," do nothing, achieve nothing, and strive for nothing.

What Calvin doesn't realize is that his grandiose plans for snow fort construction, his extensive research into the feeding habits of Tyrannosaurus Rex, and his efforts to outdo himself during "show and tell" are all work, in a way. If we can somehow refocus our lives so that our chosen leisure is also the way we make a living, then we will have achieved the kinds of riches you can never make while clocking in and out for 40 hours a week.

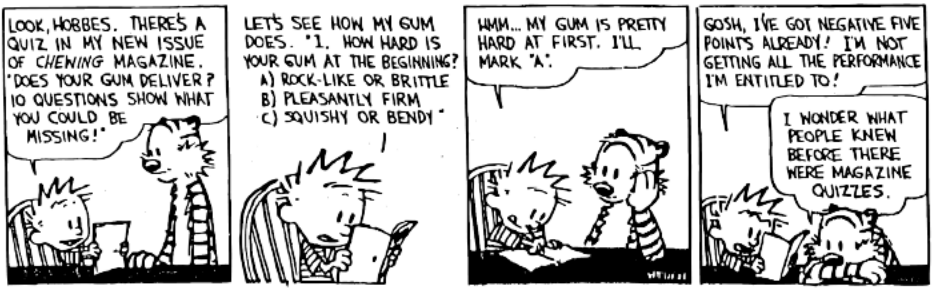


Andy Warhol once said that everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes, and this prediction seems to be coming true. Now anybody can get on TV if their lives are dramatically tragic enough. Our vast communications networks devote their energies to vampirically feeding off of misery and ignorance — then turning around and selling it right back to us. And we buy it.



It's much easier to find mesmerizing junk on television than it is to learn something important about your life. You can surf channels for a thousand hours and never learn about anything which will have a significant impact on you personally. Why are we so fascinated by the ups and downs of other people's private lives? Is it because it helps us to forget or overlook our own?

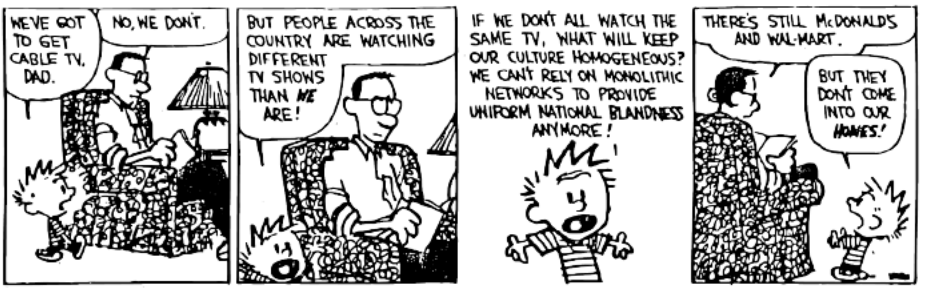
In addition to television programs and magazines which attempt to reach the broadest possible audience by focusing on the lowest common denominator, there are also "narrowcast" media which try to dominate a very small segment of the population by turning lifestyles into



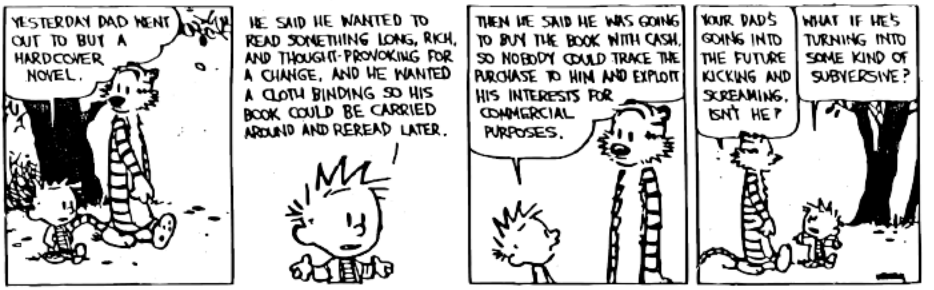
commodities. Calvin's Chewing magazine could very well be Bicycling, or Gardening, or Cartooning.



How can you be having fun unless the "experts" have confirmed the value of your Fun Index™? People who choose unusual means of recreation are often derisively ordered to "get a life" — which translates to "have fun in a more marketable way." What's more fun — to sled down a hill in a quiet forest, or to enter an "extreme" snowbording competition with $5000 worth of logo-plastered clothing and equipment?



Calvin's dad was criticizing corporate culture way before it was cool to do so. Is it really a good



idea for everybody to have the exact same cultural reference points?

Calvin's dad is clearly some kind of subversive Luddite terrorist — see below for another example.



Consumer-level advertising has hardly ever just sold the product itself. Ads from twenty, fifty, or even one hundred years ago sold efficiency, contentment, pride, and other intangibles similar to "attitude." What's different is that we are now sold entire lifestyles in addition to products, and ad companies are always on the lookout for a new rebellious lifestyle to sell



alongside the latest new rebellious product — thus the proliferation of hip-hop and "alternative" music in modern advertising.

You can always count on Hobbes to see right through our human attempts to sell lifestyles to each other. There is a deep connection between the work which dominates our daily lives and the products which we all think we must have. Without the work, we can't afford the products; without the products, what's the point of working so much?

afterword

This book was originally sixty-odd pages long. There are so many great Calvin & Hobbes strips which are relevant to the themes highlighted here that I wanted to include them all. However, because this book is supposed to be a cheap bootleg with a very low price (if any price at all), I soon realized that photocopying costs would quickly become prohibitive. As it is, a thirty-six-page book is still going to cost plenty to reproduce, but not nearly as much as one with double the page count.

I deleted a lot of the strips that I wanted to include because they were clearly repeating the same idea expressed by another strip (while remaining funny and original, of course). When I first started this project I was concerned that I might have been imposing my own agenda on Bill Watterson's creation. Now that the editing is nearly complete, I realize that this is not the case. There were so many strips that criticized television, the workplace, school, and pollution that they couldn't have been incidental one-offs intended for a daily chuckle and nothing more. If you own a large number of the Calvin & Hobbes books (I think there are fourteen of them), take a few hours to flip through them. You'll be amazed at the sheer number of strips criticizing modern art, for example, not to mention television and so forth.

There was a separate theme that I wanted to include here but just couldn't for many reasons, not the least of which was the vast number of strips to choose from. That theme is imagination. A great deal of Calvin's life is spent with an immense imaginary world filled with creativity and adventure: Spaceman Spiff, the transmogrifier, Tracer Bullet, the dinosaurs... I think most young kids live in a world like this for many years until their creative, adventurous impulses are strangled out of them by the discipline and structure of compulsory schooling. Those same impulses are kept at bay when they enter the workplace, as well. What would Calvin think of the latest in video game technology? It might occupy his attention for a while, but it could never replace his transmogrifier. He might put a Jurassic Park lunchbox on his Christmas list, but he would never give up his fascination with dinosaurs. We adults, on the other hand, have had our imaginations bought and resold. Instead of hiking in the wild woods we drive our SUVs through paved parks. Instead of creating our own music we head for the CD store. Instead of communities we have malls and chatrooms. I could go on but I think you get the point — Calvin's unlimited imagination is probably the most wonderful thing about Calvin & Hobbes, more so than the critiques of television or school.

There are many aspects of daily life which Calvin & Hobbes fails to address because of its limitations — things like romance and sex, for example. Peer pressure, politics, pornography, and the police aren't discussed, either. But no one book can give us all the answers to anything, anyway! It's a mistake to expect to find universal solutions or critiques in any one place. On that note, I hope you'll check out the bibliography below. It's full of further reading suggestions for nearly every topic covered in this book (and a few that aren't). Personally, I felt that Calvin & Hobbes helped make me more receptive to certain ideas; I hope that this collection will do the same for you, and the bibiography is a good place to start.

There will be no further "bootleg" editions of Calvin & Hobbes, at least from me, but I always have new projects in the works. My first publication was a book called The Hardcore/Punk Guide to Christianity, it was intended for a very narrow audience of kids involved in the underground punk rock/hardcore scene. If you're interested in reading it for some reason, you can order it from AK Press (PO Box 40682, San Francisco CA 94140-0682). I also did some writing for a punk rock/hardcore magazine called Inside Front (latest issue available from the

CrimethInc address in this book). Keep in touch with me and I'll let you know what's up. But please, don't just let your appreciation (or loathing) of this book become another excuse for consumption. Create your own books and magazines and songs and paintings. One of the most popular untruths in this society is that only certain kinds of people can be writers or artists — no, everbody can write and draw and sing and paint and create. Get started today!

an incomplete, suggested bibliography

work

The Abolition of Work and Other Essays by Bob Black
Work is Hell by Matt Groening
The Best of Temp Slave! edited by Jeff Kelly
Sabotage in the American Workplace edited by Martin Sprouse
Strike! by Jeremy Brecher
Why Work? Arguments for the Leisure Society edited by Vernon Richards

school

School is Hell by Matt Groening
Teaching to Transgress by bell hooks
The Teenage Liberation Handbook by Grace Llewellyn
Chomsky on Miseducation by Noam Chomsky
Poems Not For School by Benjamin Zephaniah

the environment

Industrial Society and its Future by Dr. T. Kaczynski
Limited Wants, Unlimited Means edited by John M. Gowdy
Autokind vs. Mankind by Kenneth R. Schneider
Diet for a New America by John Robbins

the media

Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television by Jerry Mander
The Medium is the Message by Marshall McLuhan
The Media Monopoly by Ben Bagdikian
Manufacturing Consent (video) by Noam Chomsky
Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies by Noam Chomsky

general subjects

Days of War, Nights of Love: Crimethink for Beginners by CrimethInc
Ishmael by Daniel Quinn (and its sequels)
Evasion (zine; book forthcoming from CrimethInc)
No Trespassing: Squatting, Rent Strikes, and Land Struggles Worldwide by Anders Corr

Most of these can be found at your local library. If you can't find them, then here is a new adventure in the making: tracking down mysterious books like some antiquarian out of a Lovecraft tale...

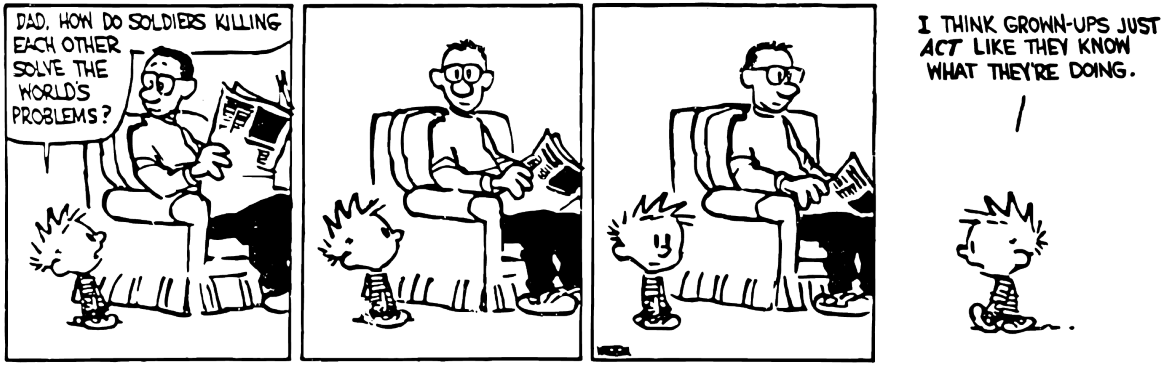
notes on revisions

NOTE: This is not the beautiful layout that Mr. Banks originally created... This is a sloppy shrunken version to save paper and distribute more widely.

[-unknown; unknown date]

NOTE: this publication has been cleaned up and re-layed-out because it is beautiful, and digital printing is way nicer than photocopying an already-multi-generation photocopy. A PDF version may be found at <http://moink.net/projects/c+h_guide/>.

[-Andrew Moll; May 2008]



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