When the Cat's Away, Neurosis Is on Display

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What if a comic strip lost its main character? Would it lose its essence? Would it even make sense? Those questions floated on Internet message boards until Dan Walsh of Dublin did us all a favor and answered them with his Web site, Garfield Minus Garfield (http://garfieldminusgarfield.tumblr.com).

The result takes Jim Davis's cartoon and strips it of the famously fat feline. All alone, Jon Arbuckle, Garfield's owner, looks manic at best and depressed at worst. And Walsh's fans seem to like it that way: The site averaged about 300,000 views a day in late February.

"The one resounding piece of feedback I've received is that people feel Jon's loneliness and desperation is just like theirs, but that his crazy antics makes them laugh at it," Walsh, 32, writes in an e-mail. "Sometimes the world can feel like a pretty intimidating place, and it takes someone like Jon to remind you to lighten up and laugh at the hopelessness of it all."

One of Walsh's occasional readers is Davis, who heard about the site a few months ago. The cartoonist calls the work "an inspired thing to do" and wishes to thank Walsh for enabling him to see another side of "Garfield."

"Some of the strips were slappers: 'Oh, I could have left that out.' It would have been funnier," Davis says.

Walsh may start having trouble finding the lonely, depressed Jon for his comics. Davis recently created a girlfriend for the longtime bachelor.

"How much humor can you get out of someone's unhappiness?" Davis muses. "Day after day for so many years -- it was getting to me, too."

Despite his efforts to eradicate the fat cat, Walsh insists that he is not a
Garfield hater.

"Believe it or not, I am a fan of Garfield," Walsh writes. "I do find the original strip funny, but not as funny as Garfield Minus Garfield (because that's my taste). It's a completely different comic once Garfield has been removed. It suddenly becomes more surreal and dark, more 'Monty Python' than 'Dick Van Dyke,' more 'South Park' than 'The Simpsons.'"

Davis has no plans to cut the cat but understands the beauty in what Walsh does.

Bloggers such as Walsh "see the futility in making everything turn out right every day," Davis says. But a little darkness "makes the positives even sweeter."

-- Amy Orndorff

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