Chester Gould (1900–1985) was born in Pawnee, Oklahoma. He attended Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) before transferring to Northwestern University in Chicago, from which he was graduated in 1923. He produced the minor comic strips Fillum Fables and The Radio Catts before striking it big with Dick Tracy in 1931. Originally titled Plainclothes Tracy, the rechristened strip became one of the most successful and lauded comic strips of all time, as well as a media and merchandising sensation. He was twice accorded the “Cartoonist of the Year” Reuben Award by his peers. Gould continued to write and illustrate Dick Tracy until his retirement in 1977.

“One of the best things to happen to the comic market in the last few years was IDW’s decision to publish The Complete Chester Gould’s Dick Tracy.”

—Scoop

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“The period covered in this volume is arguably one of the strongest in the Gould/Tracy canon, and undeniably the cartoonist’s best work since 1952’s Crewy Lou continuity. Brutality by both the good and bad guys is on strong and disturbing as ever…”

from the Introduction by Max Allan Collins

Brutality by both the good and bad guys is on strong and disturbing as ever…”

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“Meet You at the Morgue!”
by MAX ALLAN COLLINS

[Spoiler Alert: Important story elements are revealed in this introduction. Readers may wish to read the strips before this essay.]

T
ough it’s little commented upon these days, Batman was very much conceived as Dick Tracy in costumed-hero drag. Just as Bruce Wayne’s ward was Dick Grayson, Dick Tracy’s adoptive son was Junior, and the only real difference was the wardrobe. Those two square-jawed heroes, Dick Tracy and Batman, used both scientific investigative methods and outlandish inventions as they fought grotesque villains in adventures depicted against the backdrop of a geometric big city. The cartoony style of both features took some of the edge off the sometimes shocking violence on display.

Where Tracy and Batman varied, however, was in the latter feature’s reliance on recurring villains. In the ‘40s through the pre-Adam West ‘60s, scores of stories featured a handful of popular bad guys—the Joker, the Penguin, the Catwoman. In Chester Gould’s world, however, villains rarely returned. Certainly Flattop, Shaky, and the Brow—just to mention Tracy’s 1944 adversaries—are villains on a par with the Bat-trio mentioned above. But Gould’s Old Testament world view required that villainy meet its rough-justice reward. At the end of a Tracy continuity, the villain—however lovably eccentric he or she might be, no matter how vividly designed and drawn—would wind up in the morgue, “just a slab number with a tag on his toe,” as Tracy says considering the corpse of one of this volume’s villains. Chief Patton adds: “Some get there sooner than others, but they all get here.”

In Dick Tracy they sure do, and variations on the scene referred to above appear several times in the pages ahead. Gould was unforgiving, not only of his well-conceived, deftly designed bad guys, but of his own creativity. He continually challenged himself to top the previous villain with an even better one.

Nearing the quarter of a century mark of his famous strip’s existence, Gould for the first time reconsidered his penchant for consigning his greatest creations to morgue slabs. Even a decade later, Flattop remained as famous as Tracy himself. Fans wrote letters begging for the bad guy’s return. But Flattop had been killed not only merely dead, but really most sincerely dead.

Much of what makes Dick Tracy unique is the conflict inherent in its creator’s desires—Chester Gould, as previously noted in these introductions, was a frustrated humor cartoonist. In his decade-plus effort to land a major syndicated strip he tried damn near everything—sports, editorial, even Ripley’s Believe It Or Not knock-offs—but mostly he submitted samples for “big foot” humor strips. His Tracy proposal was just another in a long list of enthusiastic, sometimes desperate attempts to attract the attention of the Chicago Tribune-New York News Syndicate.

He wound up creating the world’s most famous detective (after Sherlock Holmes, anyway) and becoming known for bringing a new level of violence to the comic strip. This made for an ironic kind of success. Throughout his nearly fifty years on Tracy, Gould introduced as many zany humor elements as possible, notably B.O. Plenty and Gravel Gertie, but also in special Sunday “topper” strips for Tracy featuring such wacky and largely forgotten strips as The Gravies and Sawdust. (In the Tribune and some other Sunday sections, these “toppers” actually appeared below the main feature.) After stepping down from Tracy, Chester Gould worked feverishly on a humor strip called Check-Out Chickie (turned down by the Tribune Syndicate—back to square one!).

Gould was obviously successful with the hillbilly Plenty family and for many years Vitamin Flintheart provided solid comic relief, but attempts to use Tracy, Sam Catchem, and others in the recurring cast almost always fell flat. Tracy was a great
detective, but not much of a comedian. These unsuccessful attempts at squad-room humor were invariably accompanied by big open-jawed guffaws from the rest of the characters, cuing the reader to laugh. Which the reader didn’t.

Where Gould’s penchant for humor truly blossomed—again, ironically—was in the creation of his villains. If Tracy’s bad guys are grotesque, they are comically so. This absurd, dark humor marks Gould at his best, and not incidentally fueled Al Capp’s satirical Fearless Fosdick, the strip-within-the-strip in Lil Abner. Gould professed not to mind his colleague’s spoof, and bragged about Tracy always picking up papers when Capp ran a Fosdick continuity (“You can’t understand the spoof without seeing the original”). Privately, though, he hated it, and once called Capp on the phone and said, “Hey, enough’s enough.” Gould knew that Fosdick was built on a faulty premise: that the Tracy cartoonist didn’t know that his bad guys were absurdly funny. Of course Chet knew.

Gould’s genius was tied to his ability to bring the reader back day after day for another slice of the Tracy pie. A particularly canny part of that technique was the running gags, which were
Dick Tracy remained a licensing bonanza in the 1950s. From left to right: Braces from De Luxe, Crime Stoppers Lab from Porter Chemical, Pen knife with glow-in-the-dark grips from Camco, and a pedal Squad Car from Murray.

frequently tied to villains. In these pages, toupee-sporting Rughead constantly has flies gathering around his rug, occasionally has his rug fly off reflecting its owner’s surprise, and even suffers the indignity (while on the lam in Mexico) of a salesman trying to peddle him a bullfighter’s be-ribboned wig.

Wearing nothing but a towel and two shoulder-holstered rods, corpulent crook Oodles repeatedly weighs himself—and it always comes up 467 pounds. Two wild boys repeat a nonsense phrase—“Neki hokey!”—and a parrot slurringly mentioning the thought-long-dead Mumbles startles Sam Catchem (several times) into responding with that “late” villain’s famous catch-phrase: “What did he say?” In the same story, towering, wild-haired health food faddist George Ozone says again and again, while continually exercising, “You wouldn’t think I was 84.”

Wild boys Neki and Hokey make an effectively comic duo and are Gould’s best take on kid characters in some time. The ill-conceived Little Wingy, on her way to comic-strip oblivion, makes an appearance, with her trademark irritating baby talk: “He not like we. We not like he.” (Sparkle and the Plentys appear here chiefly in special Christmas greetings.)

But Gould knows he has something with Neki and Hokey. Their crazy cavorting and flower-eating ways work well within a continuity about health fads. Still, they are not destined to be recurring characters, despite an effort on Gould’s part to make “neki hokey” a phrase used by others in coming continuities. “Neki hokey,” we are told, “comes from a South Seas tribe and means almost anything—from joy to anger, from hello to farewell.” Maybe so, but it didn’t catch on.

Nonetheless, Neki and Hokey reflect Gould’s interest in, and frequent success with, comic material. The strip’s chief dissonance, however, and a secret to its success, is the contrast between the zany-looking and often zany-acting villains and the violence those same characters suddenly visit upon others... topped off by the violence Gould will eventually visit upon them.
That Rughead has an absurdly obvious wig and constantly uses “Root Creme Wig Oil”—a reference to the widely seen series of Fearless Fosdick ads for Wildroot Cream Oil!—doesn’t mean he won’t wind up on a morgue slab. Oodles is one of Gould’s most amusingly designed villains, and after he crash-diets to change his appearance while on the run, the character finally flips hilariously out, demanding, “Let me have just one suckling pig, roasted in brown gravy!” But this same character kills an old lady and himself meets a bullet courtesy of Dick Tracy. Morgue slab, please.

Similarly, “Nothing” Yonson, a great secondary bad guy, has tiny squiggly features and an appropriate catch-phrase: “I don’t know nothing.” But he is also casually vicious, willing to let a wounded flunky bleed out so that the body can be quietly disposed (via a musical instrument case, a Gould favorite).

This confluence of comedy and brutality makes Tracy as much a horror comic as anything EC ever put out.

If the previous year or so had not been Gould’s finest—featuring lesser villains 3-D Magee and Pony, and an interminable visit from failed “funny” character “Uncle Canhead” Plenty—the period covered in this volume is arguably one of the strongest in the Gould/Tracy canon, and undeniably the cartoonist’s best work since 1952’s Crewy Lou continuity.

Possibly a tepid public response to more recent villains inspired Gould to reach into the past to re-boot his creativity. The return of Mumbles, one of the most popular Tracy villains of the classic ’40s, certainly seems to have re-energized the strip. Mumbles, with his slurred speech and sleepy Robert Mitchum visage, remains in his rebirth a wonderfully dark comic creation, the design of the character among Gould’s strongest.

Though for a time he is off-stage, and even upon entering lurks a while on the periphery, Mumbles makes the “Neki Hokey” continuity truly memorable. In the 1950s, Gould was always attuned to the public’s interests—note the brief Ed Sullivan appearance—and here he taps into the public’s fascination with calypso. Mumbles had been a crooner before, but now absurdly decked out in kitschy island attire complete with oversized hat, he seems a borderline buffoon.

But that is merely part of Gould’s subversive strategy. Before the tale is out, Mumbles will brutally murder a femme fatale (July 7, 1955), with a close-up showing the murderer at work, emphasizing the casual evil of a comedian who is really a monster.

That Rughead was the rare Gould villain who had not been killed unequivocally at the end of his first continuity. Had Gould disposed of Mumbles ambiguously with forethought? Surely Tracy’s creator knew that the public was responding to Mumbles...
like no other villain since Flattop. Maybe this one time, Gould decided to
keep a great villain in his pocket for a rainy day.

After returning to one of his greatest bad guys, Gould also returns to
form, following up with strong comic villain Oodles and throwaway baddie
“Nothing” Yonson, two of his most memorable 1950s creations. Even
secondary characters like defrocked lawyer Pocketclip and doomed thrush
Julie Martlin are beautifully designed and characterized, as is murderess
Cinn in the latter part of the Mumbles story, When asked by Mumbles
if she holds a grudge against him, cool-eyed Cinn says “yes” while she
outrageously blows a skull-shaped smoke ring.

Zeroing in on juvenile delinquency and the popularity of Marlon
Brando in The Wild One and Elvis Presley on television, Gould fashions
Joe Period as a greasy-haired, handsome hoodlum in a black leather jacket
and driving a souped-up hot rod. If 3-D Magee and Pony were patterned
on the real-life Honeymoon Killers, Joe Period is cut from a James Dean-
colored cloth. The young hoodlum first enters as a secondary bad guy, but
his charisma is undeniable and Gould soon lends him center stage.

Joe Period is a resourceful hood who leads Tracy and Sam on as merry
a chase as any 1930s-era outlaw. He seems to be able to get out of whatever
hole he’s dug for himself. It is in the midst of this extended chase that a
cornered Joe Period partners up with another juvenile delinquent, a slight-
of-frame “boy” with a big, familiar head.

Flattop Jr. (though never called that here) shows Gould again reaching
into his bag of successes to finally give the public what it’s been demanding
for more than a decade: the return of Flattop. But by making the character
Flattop’s offspring, Gould has it both ways: he can play off the familiar
look of the original character and at the same time use the young teenage
delinquent in ways unique to this new era and new character.

If Joe Period’s souped-up rod could hit dizzying speeds, Flattop’s is as
tricked-out as James Bond’s Aston Martin (Gould often said that he felt
Flattop Jr.’s car was the pattern for Bond’s). Whereas the Bond vehicle was
rigged for weaponry and escape, Flattop Jr. has made his vehicle a home
for more than a decade: the return of Flattop. But by making the character
into his bag of successes to finally give the public what it’s been demanding
of-frame “boy” with a big, familiar head.

Throughout this exhilarating period, Gould displays his usual skills
and interests. If he is still using a more delicate line than seen in his best
bold work, he continues to make evocative use of lighting effects (January
23, 1955) and silhouette (November 24, 1954). Again he vividly depicts
scenes rife with snow, fire, smoke, rain, and fog. In particular, the end of
the Mumbles sequence is dramatically set in a marsh with Tracy pursuing
the bad guy in zero visibility.

Brutality by both the good and bad guys is as strong and disturbing as
ever. Gunfights are often depicted silently, as in the November 17, 1954
shoot-out with Rughead and his boys, the latter reacting to one of their
number, now a bullet-riddled corpse: “What do we do with this?” After
one shoot-out, Tracy casually says to his fellows, “I’ll meet you at the
morgue.” A wounded Joe Period, whose life is saved on a boxcar through
the ministrations of a drunken old doctor, later casually dumps his savior
off a moving train.

Gould’s Tracy had always been home to cutting-edge police procedure,
but never more overtly than in 1954-56. Tracy makes use of the “moniker”
file, a comparative microscope to i.d. animal hair, ballistics to match a
shotgun to shells, a nationwide TV line-up, a lie detector, a portable TV
camera, a microfilm camera, and a hand-held electronic telephone number
pick-up. There is reconstruction of a headlight from a hit-and-run scene,
while paint fragments from a hit-and-run victim’s clothing are studied
under a microscope. Fingerprints are matched up, tests are made for human
blood, and Junior makes a clay model of Rughead’s head using the bad
guy’s high school yearbook photo.

More police procedure comes by way of following the training of a
new policewoman named Lizz.

We’ll be seeing more of her…and Flattop Jr.

Max Allan Collins took over writing Dick Tracy from Chester Gould in 1977 and
continued into 1993, working first with Rick Fletcher and then Dick Locher. His run
on the strip is highly regarded, as is such other comics work as Ms. Tree, Batman, and
the graphic novel Road to Perdition, on which the Academy Award-winning film was
based. An award-winning mystery novelist and indie filmmaker, Collins’s most recent
works include the Nathan Heller historical thriller Ask Not and King of the Weeds,
a Mike Hammer novel begun by the late Mickey Spillane. He lives in Iowa with his
wife Barbara, with whom he writes the award-winning Trash ‘n’ Treasures mystery
series under the penname “Barbara Allan.”

Opposite: Will Elder’s double-parody of both
the original (Tracy) and the parody (Fearless
Fodick) in Panic #5, October-November 1954.
& MUG SHOT FILES

HANK STEELE 1933
J. P. TWILLBRAIN 1933
MAXINE VILLER 1933
GYP, THE FENCE 1933
OLD MIKE 1933

“SLICER” 1933
“SLIP” BUCKLEY 1933
BOSS JIM HERROD 1933
“CONFIDENCE” 1933
SANDY MAGUIRE 1933

Third in a Series

Our current story begins on the next page...
NOW, RAINBOW, GO OVER THAT SEQUENCE OF SOUNDS ONCE MORE—THE ONES YOU HEARD AS RUGHEAD DROVE YOU IN HIS CAR.

FIRST, THE SAWMILL. THEN THE RAILROAD TRAIN. THEN THE RICKETY BRIDGE WITH THE NOISY PLANKS—

LOCATING A RAILROAD AND SAWMILL WOULD BE EASY—but the rickety bridge—there are hundreds of them.

AND AT THE RIDING STABLE—

I FIGURE YOU SHERIFFS KNOW YOUR OWN COUNTRIES BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE. THIS BLIND GIRL’S DESCRIPTION OF THE SOUNDS SHE HEARD MAY BE RING A BELL. LISTEN CLOSELY.

WHEN YOU WANT A PART PLAYED BACK, RAISE YOUR FINGER AND WE’LL REPEAT. LET’ER GO, SAM.

MEANWHILE

I’M MRS. TRACY AND I’D LIKE TO INVITE YOU TO STAY WITH US TILL YOU’VE MADE PLANS TO BE GLAD TO HELP YOU GET CLOTHES. IT’S COOL NOW YOU KNOW.

NEWSPAPER WRITERS ARE WAITING TO INTERVIEW YOU FOR FEATURE STORIES. YOU’RE A VERY POPULAR LITTLE LADY, RAINBOW.

THANK YOU.

YES, I UNDERSTAND, RUGHEAD—SURE—YOU CAN AFFORD TO LAY LOW FOR 6 MONTHS. THAT LAST BATCH WAS REAL GREAT. I’VE GOT 200 GRAND FOR YOU.

I’M GOING OVER AND SEE HIM. THE DOUGH IS READY. A PAYOFF FOR EVERYBODY YOU TWO WAIT HERE.

MAYBE A LITTLE DINNER PARTY, HUH, RUGHEAD? ENTERTAINMENT—WINE? MAYBE?
YES, THIS MAN HAS BEEN DEAD FOR AT LEAST 48 HOURS.

NO WONDER HIS HORSES ARE STARVED FOR FEED AND WATER.

MY DAUGHTER HAS BEEN RIDING ONCE A WEEK. SHE DISCOVERED THE BODY WHEN SHE CAME TO THE STABLE THIS MORNING.

AFTER THE BODY'S POSTED, CORONER HAVE ALL SHOTGUN PELLETS YOU FIND SENT TO THE LAB.

CHARLIE, TAKE AN OVER-ALL SHOT FROM THAT HAY BALE.

THE WHOLE BUNCH IS PHONY.

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE LIGHTNESS OF HIS HAY TRUCK THE DAY THE STATE TROOPERS STOPPED HIM FOR A WEEK?

WHAT APPEARS TO BE HAIR IS EMBEDDED IN THE WOOD. WE'LL WANT TO EXAMINE ONE OF THESE 'BALES' AT THE LAB.

THE KILLER WAS A HEAVY MAN AND HE WAS A CIGAR SMOKER. WE HAVE HIS CIGAR ASH AND AN EMPTY SHOTGUN SHELL TO TAKE BACK.

IT'S AN ODD THING—THE DETAIL THAT SAT ON THIS SPOT FOR 5 DAYS AND NIGHTS NEVER SAW ANYONE COME OR GO, EXCEPT THE GIRL WHO DISCOVERED THE BODY.

WHAT IS IT?

HMP? LOOKS LIKE A TUNNEL.

MEANWHILE, CHIEF PATTON HAS BEEN SHOWING SALSLEK AND LITTLE WINO SOME SPECIAL PRINTS FROM THE ROGUES GALLERY.

NOW HERE ARE THREE MEN NICKNAMED 'HAPPY'. IS HE HERE?