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Asterix: A French Superhero

By Annick Houzé

French Cataloger, Harold B. Lee Library

Every time I pick up an Astérix comic book, my mind goes back to a wintry Saturday morning in 1965. I was one of forty kids in a classroom learning a poem about French soldiers dying on a plain in the North of France. One student started giggling; he was reading the new Astérix comic. Astérix’s friend Obélix had jumped into a swimming pool, and his weight had shifted all the water into a neighboring swimming pool. When the guard in the comic asked the chief of the Gauls where the Gauls were, the chief answered, "The Gauls are in the full one" (the full swimming pool). The word “full” in French is "pleine" and sounds like the word "plain." Upset, our teacher asked the boy why he was giggling. The student replied, "It is not the French soldiers who are in the pleine; it’s the Gauls." Everyone started laughing (except the teacher), and all forty kids started shouting, "The Gauls are in the pleine." Then we started singing the words to the tune of "La Marseillaise," the French national anthem. Finally the teacher was able to restore peace in the classroom, but we were all punished and had to write "La Marseillaise" 200 times.

The Astérix comic strip is one of France’s most popular comic strips. Created by René Goscinny (text) and Albert Uderzo (Illustrations), Astérix le Gaulois (Asterix the Gaul) appeared for the first time in Pilote, the French weekly comic magazine. The easy, understandable humor of Asterix has made this comic strip appealing to both children and adults. In fact it became so popular that it was published in book form. In 1977, around eighteen million copies were sold, and Asterix was translated into many languages. Goscinny and Uderzo became wealthy and famous.
Rene Goscinny, born in 1926 in Paris and raised in Argentina, came to the United States in 1945. He wanted to become a cartoonist for Walt Disney but was never able to achieve this dream. Instead, he worked as a cartoonist for Mad magazine and later as an art director for a children’s publishing house which went bankrupt. After seven years in the United States, he returned to France and became scriptwriter for the French cowboy comic strip Lucky Luke. Goscinny also wrote the lesser known but very funny series Le Petit Nicolas. In the 1950s Goscinny and Uderzo created Asterix. At the time of his death in 1977, Goscinny was the president and director general of Les Productions Rene Goscinny and vice-president of Editions Dargaud, the company that published Astérix. After Goscinny died, Uderzo continued the Asterix tradition; new Asterix adventures continue to appear occasionally.

Albert Uderzo, born in 1927 in Fismes, France, became a comic book illustrator. He joined Goscinny as co-founder of Pilote, and there they produced the first strip of Astérix. Because of their artistic talents, Uderzo and Goscinny have received the highest honors that can be given to citizens of France.

Publisher’s Weekly compared the popularity of Astérix in Europe to that of Superman and Charlie Brown in the United States, noting that the strip contained "free play of incidental humor and broad satire, . . . sufficiently universal to appeal to American readers" (Something about the Author, p. 91). So what, or more precisely who, is Astérix?

The characters in the strip, who are inhabitants of a small but indomitable village, include the following: Astérix is a happy, short warrior who has a mustache and who always wears a winged helmet. His best friend and fellow warrior is Obélix, a happy, fat, not too smart, but extremely strong giant. His business is to cut and deliver menhirs (the ancient stones that archaeologists still wonder about today) to those who wish to buy them. Obélix’s main hobbies are hunting and eating wild boars, and fighting the Romans. In the later stories Obélix has a little dog, Idéfix (known in English translations as Dogmatix). Dogmatix gets very upset and sad when trees die. The reason for Obélix’s strength is that he fell in a cauldron full of magic potion when he was little.

The magic potion, which makes people very strong—almost invulnerable for a few hours (except for Obélix: his strength is permanent)—is the creation of the village druid, Panoramix (Getafix in English translations). Getafix has also created several other astonishing and interesting concoctions.

The wise village chief, the well-known Abraracourix (Vitalstatistix in English translations), is respected by all the villagers. Vitalstatistix is afraid of only one thing: that the sky will fall on his head.

What would a village be without a bard? Assurancetourix (Cacofonix in English translations) thinks he is a genius who has not yet been discovered. His friends—in fact, the entire village—think he has an awful voice. Cacofonix’s companions will let him sing only to scare the enemies, especially the Romans.

This story is set in a village in Armorique (ancient name for Brittany), in
Gaul, (ancient name for France) in the year 50 B.C. The village has been successful in resisting the invasion attempts of a frustrated Julius Caesar who is the indisputable conqueror of all Gaul, except for this very small village in Armorique.

The plot of all the Astérix stories is basically the same. An enemy, usually the Romans, is trying to control or conquer the small village and its warriors. But the enemy is always thwarted by one of the following: Astérix’s cleverness and ingenuousness; Getafix’s different potions, usually the "magic potion" that gives supernatural strength; Obélis’s strength; or Cacofonix’s atrocious voice.

What makes Astérix a definite success with children and adults is the humor. According to the Times Literary Supplement: "the comedy is either verbal (there are excruciating puns) or else consists of . . . historical jokes, anachronisms and topical allusions" (Contemporary Authors, p. 150). For example, in Astérix et Cléopatre (Asterix and Cleopatra), Obélis decides to climb the Egyptian Sphinx. In doing so he breaks the nose, and this is why the Sphinx now has no nose. A Village Voice critic commented that "vocabulary and puns are two of the books’ strong points—and part of what makes it possible for a grownup to read them to kids with some interest as well as pleasure" (Contemporary Authors, p. 150).

The comical aspect of Astérix is also found in the characters’ physical traits. When Astérix and Obélis go to Greece for the Olympic Games, to Corsica to help fight off the Romans, or to Great Britain to save Britain from the tyranny of the Romans, the comic strip’s creators present a caricature of these different races. These caricatures not only reveal physical aspects of each race but also mannerisms, cultural background, and even language. In Astérix chez les Bretons (Asterix in Britain), the British refuse to go to war on weekends. The Roman armies become frustrated because they do not understand why their enemies won’t fight when the week has ended. The Romans are also perplexed by their enemies, who stop fighting at 4:00 pm to drink a cup of hot water with milk (tea had not yet been invented).

In Astérix chez les Belges (Asterix in Belgium), the wife of the Belgian chief is the caricature of Annie Cordy, a well-known singer in Europe who was born in Belgium. In this story, Astérix has to make a white flag, and the only white fabric available is some lace. Of course, Belgian lace is internationally recognized for its beauty. The wit and facetiousness of the comic definitely contribute to the success of the written part of the Astérix series. However, it is necessary to note that Goscinny and Uderzo did not intend to ridicule other cultures and races. They notice the particularities of different races "but direct their humor at stereotypes" (Contemporary Authors, p. 150).

The remarkable talent of Uderzo, the comic’s illustrator, makes the Astérix books unique and enjoyable for all readers. In fact, Village Voice writes: "Uderzo’s drawings are bright and clear and complex enough to delight anyone
literal-minded, while Goscinny’s text bubbles along, never missing a chance for a wisecrack, double entendre, or interesting sidetrack" (Contemporary Authors, p. 150). Uderzo’s drawings are also neat and orderly, and the details make these adventures fun and effortless. The colors are bright and efficient, clearly representing the different moods.

Goscinny and Uderzo collaborated to create a success story. Astérix stories have delighted millions of readers (young and not so young), and they will continue to do so.

**Astérix Comics by Goscinny and Uderzo**


References


Obelix, Asterix’s inseparable friend. Taken from Asterix in Corsica, 1981. Reprinted with permission.