

# Arguing

# COMICS

## Literary Masters on a Popular Medium

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UNIVERSITY PRESS OF MISSISSIPPI  
JACKSON

[www.upress.state.ms.us](http://www.upress.state.ms.us)

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## Dorothy Parker

### "A Mash Note to Crockett Johnson"

October 3, 1943. The publisher wishes to thank the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for authorizing the use of Dorothy Parker's work.

I cannot write a review of Crockett Johnson's book of *Barnaby*. I have tried and tried, but it never comes out a book review. It is always a valentine for Mr. Johnson.

For a bulky segment of a century, I have been an avid follower of comic strips—all comic strips; this is a statement made with approximately the same amount of pride with which one would say, "I've been shooting cocaine into my arm for the past twenty-five years." I cannot remember how the habit started, and I am presently unable to explain why it persists. I know only that I'm hooked, by now, that's all. I can't stop. I even take a certain unspeakable tabloid for its strips, though, when I am caught with it on my doorstep, I still have shame enough left to try to laugh matters off by explaining that you really ought to know what your enemies are up to. When I tell you that I am in daily touch with the horrible, sightless, Orphan Annie—who, I am convinced, is Westbrook Pegler's adopted child—that I keep up with the particular nasty experiences of Dick Tracy, that even, for heaven's sake, I was the one who strung along with Deathless Deer until her mercy killing, you will know that Mother is a gone pigeon. When cornered, I try to make rather doggy excuses. I say that comic strips are important pieces of Americana. But it doesn't hold, you know. You cannot class the relationship between Flash Gordon and Dale as something peculiarly American. I flatly do not know why I do as I do. For I do not enjoy the strips. I read them solemnly and sourly, and there is no delight in me because of them.

That is, I had no delight and no enjoyment and no love until *Barnaby* came. I suppose you must do it this way; I suppose you must file *Barnaby* under comic strips, because his biography runs along in strip form in a newspaper. I bow to convention in the matter. But, privately, if the adventures of *Barnaby* constitute a comic strip, then so do those of *Huckleberry Finn*.

I think, and I am trying to talk calmly, that *Barnaby* and his friends and oppressors are the most important additions to American arts and letters in Lord knows how many years. I know that they are the most important additions to my heart.

I love Barnaby, I love little Jane, I love Gus, the Ghost, I hate and admire and envy Mr. O'Malley, above all I love Gorgon, the dog.

I think the conception of a dog who talks—"Didn't know I could do it; never tried it before, I guess"—and then turns out to be such a crashing bore that they have to lock him away so they won't be obliged to listen to him, is—well, it's only glorious, that's all. You have to love dogs before you can go on to the step of taking them down, understandingly. I think Mr. Johnson must love dogs. I think Mr. Johnson must love people. I know darned well I must love Mr. Johnson.

*Barnaby* is fine to have in book form—you can't go on, you know, cutting strips out of *PM* and meaning to paste them in an album the next rainy day. The book will be invaluable to those who must read aloud a while every evening: I am told by those fortunates who own them, that children love *Barnaby*; which information has appreciably raised my estimation of children. While for adults—I can only say *Barnaby*, the book, costs \$2. If you have \$5, save out three for the landlord and spend the remainder to feed your soul.

Well. I told you I couldn't write anything but a valentine, didn't I?