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A Cartoonist's Mind

Randall Munroe moves beyond the Internet with the publication of his first book, a collection of his webcomic *xkcd*

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For years, Julie Crum couldn't understand why her teenage son spent hours in his room doodling in his notebook.

"He had notebooks and notebooks full of artistic and math doodles, as well as lists of words," Crum says of her eldest son. "At times it was frustrating because he was doodling when he should have been doing his homework."

Little did she know that those notebooks would launch her son's career. Randall Munroe, a physics major who spent time working on robots for NASA, now makes his living not as a scientist but as a cartoonist. His webcomic *xkcd* pulls in close to 1 million individual viewers a day, says Munroe, making it one of most popular comic strips on the Internet.

Munroe now spends his days crafting jokes that riff on programming code, math equations and nerd culture, using stick figures to get his point across. The 25-year-old graduate of Chesterfield's Mathematics and Science High School at Clover Hill has spoken about *xkcd* at Google headquarters, as well as several national conferences and conventions, and he put out his first book, *xkcd: volume 0*, in September.

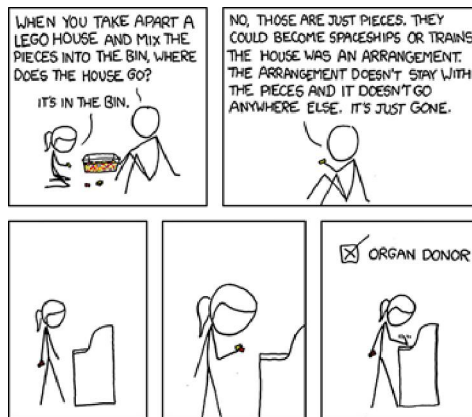
The collection, which assembles more than 150 of Munroe's strips, moved 5,469 copies in its first week of release; the first printing of 10,000 has sold out as of this writing. "His book has been selling well," says Alexis Ohanian, founder of breadpig, a Web site that sells what he describes as "geeky" items, including the *xkcd* book, which is published through his site.

Ohanian describes Munroe's fans as "geeks," the sort of folks who gave *xkcd* a lot of its early exposure at another of Ohanian's creations, reddit, an online news site where readers' votes determine what goes on the front page.

"They are a special type of person, myself included, that are quirky and weird," Ohanian says. "Randy is clearly a thoughtful geek who has social coolness. Despite his Internet fame, he is still grounded and appreciative of people who have allowed him to draw stick-figure people."

As a youngster, Munroe loved reading comic strips in the newspaper, everything from *FoxTrot* and *Calvin and Hobbes* to *Dilbert* and *Peanuts*. He had the idea that cartooning would be the perfect job. "I thought you don't have to work much, and you sit around in your underwear all day," Munroe says. "There was only one problem with that type of career aspiration — I thought, 'I can't draw and I can't make jokes.'"

He was wrong.



The strip "Lego," courtesy of *xkcd* creator Randall Munroe;
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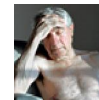
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"I'm lucky if I can squeeze out a decent math/physics/Internet joke once a month, and he does it every few days. He's clearly smarter than me," says Bill Amend, *FoxTrot's* creator. "The fact that he thought to use stick figures and I didn't drives me insane with envy around deadlines." Amend featured *xkcd* in a *FoxTrot* installment where he fantasized about converting his own strip to a webcomic. "I've spoofed a fair number of newspaper comics over the years and thought it would be fun to do the same with some of the webcomics I enjoy," he says. "I thought my *xkcd* joke turned out pretty well. I'm waiting for Randall to steal it."

Growing Up

Born in Easton, Pa., Munroe moved with his family to the Beach Road area of Chesterfield from Lakeville, Mass., when he was 10 years old. He eventually wound up at the Chesterfield County Mathematics and Science High School at Clover Hill.

As a child, Munroe was "pretty laid back and easygoing," his mom says. She realized he had a keen sense for language and numbers when at the age of 2 he began telling her how many graham crackers he would have if he broke one in half. "He said, 'Now I have two.' I asked him if he broke it again, how many would he have, and he said, 'Four.'"

When he was 6, Munroe got one of his favorite birthday presents: A 100-foot tape measure. "I've been into numbers and counting things as long as I can remember," he says. "I measured everything I could when I was little."

In 1992, when Munroe was 7, he made his own underwater probe to figure out the depth of the lake at his grandmother's summer home on Cape Cod.

"He used a ribbon, and he marked it off with a magic marker in 1-foot increments," recalls Crum. "He sewed together a mesh bag of rocks and used that as the weight. He would get on the inflatable raft and paddle out to see how deep the water was so he could map the lake. He even had a waterproof notebook that he wrote in."

The cartoonist attributes his interest in math and science in part to his father, Michael Munroe, who works in the fields of engineering and marketing. "My father's family had Ph.D.s in several interesting fields," he says. "His sister was a mathematician, and his brother was a chemist." Crum notes that Munroe's younger brothers, Ricky and Doug, are also interested in math and science.

Although he found the world around him intriguing, Munroe didn't feel the same way about elementary school. "I would read a book at my desk while the teacher taught," he says. "She took away the book, and I would get another one and start reading. She took that one away, too."

The next day Munroe showed up with a backpack of books. "The teacher would take one away, and I would apologize and smile and take out another one. I remember that she took away eight to 10 books in a span of 10 minutes."

Munroe admits he had trouble paying attention in school to "anything past 30 seconds at a time." When he was in the ninth grade, one of his teachers suggested he might have Attention Deficit Disorder. "I started treatment for that, and that really improved my academic work," Munroe says, stopping short of saying he has ADD but adding, "As a theory, it seems to fit."

That "theory" could explain his mediocre grades in high school. "They were pretty bad," Crum says. "He'd get an A one semester and an F the next." Munroe was constantly reminded by his teachers that he had the ability to do better. "I know the 'You are not performing up to your potential' speech by heart," he says with a laugh. "I guess I was one of those troubled kids."

He was also, he says, "nerdy." "I was one of those kids who spent a lot of time trying to observe other people and figure out how they worked. With my friends I was kind of a smartass, and that has turned into a career."

One of Munroe's high-school buddies, Derek Radtke, is now his business partner at *xkcd*, handling the technology aspect of the business out of the apartment they share in Somerville, Mass. During their high-school years, the two spent their spare time building radio-controlled submarines, none of which, according to Munroe, "worked real well."

They first met in class when they were told to come up with a set of steps for making peanut-butter sandwiches. Radtke's reply delved into the need for a universe with habitual climates so that life would start and people could grow grain. "I thought, 'This is a guy I can get along with,'"

Munroe says.

Radtke felt the same way about Munroe. He liked the fact that his schoolmate “thought about stuff” they discussed. “Some of Randy’s earlier doodlings were back-and-forth conversations between us,” Radtke says.

Physics and Stick Figures

Munroe’s interest in physics was piqued in the 10th grade, when his science teacher steered him toward a physics textbook to answer a question he had posed about nuclear bombs. “I flipped through it, and everything was fascinating,” he says.

When he entered Christopher Newport University, Munroe waffled between physics and engineering but eventually chose physics as his major. In 2005, the summer before his graduation, he accepted an internship at NASA’s Langley Research Center, where he worked on a virtual-reality project. In 2006, a few months before graduation, he went back to NASA as a contractor, working on robotics. “I was learning as I went along,” he says. “It wasn’t something I was too into. It took me a while to realize I wasn’t having a lot of fun. I was working with a lot of middle-aged engineers, and I didn’t relate to them.”

By that point, Munroe was also drawing comics full-time. During college, he had scanned his high-school doodles into his computer, and he started putting a few online in the fall of 2005 as comics. One of the first strips to get passed around on the Internet was titled “Pi Equals.” It suggested that the person who built the universe might have left a cry for help in the digits of pi. “People liked the joke,” he says. He was able to eke out 30 or 40 strips from his old notebooks. “They were the thing that kicked it off,” he says.

Crum was surprised at her son’s comedic chops. “We didn’t see his unusual sense of humor early on,” she says, adding that she has found herself in some of his strips. One of her favorites is “Snacktime Rules,” in which Munroe notes her influence on his nerdiness, depicting Crum answering her son’s query about snacking in his bedroom with, “You know you only get that privilege when your age is one less than a multiple of three.”

Munroe has known how to market *xkcd* from the beginning. He encouraged people to post his comics on their Web sites for free, embedding them with a link back to his own site. “That’s how it spread,” he says. “There are tens of thousands of Web sites that have *xkcd* embedded in them.”

The book’s publisher, Ohanian, a U.Va. grad, also helped kick-start Munroe’s rise to fame when he put one of the cartoonist’s early comics on the front page of reddit on Oct. 1, 2005. “It became a mainstay of reddit,” Ohanian says. Links to *xkcd* strips at Boing Boing, the self-described “Directory of Wonderful Things,” were another huge traffic generator for the strip.

Munroe started selling T-shirts related to *xkcd* while he was at NASA, and he says he was soon making more money than he did at his NASA day job, which he left after about a year. During Christmas 2006, his mom and his brother Ricky helped him ship the T-shirts from his home. “He was swamped with orders,” she says.

One of the shirts featured a heart made up of zeros and ones. “It spelled out ‘I love you’ in binary code,” Crum explains. Today, Munroe sells everything from T-shirts to skirts with a programming cheat sheet around the hem. Since the book’s release, his sales have soared from 100 orders a day to 1,000.

Programming the Future

Most cartoonists write to deadline, but Munroe often draws the strip the day before it goes online. “I have a bunch of ideas,” he explains. “I sketch notes. I sit down for a few hours and take my favorite of those and draw it as a comic. I’m a perfectionist about where words get placed. I spend time getting everything lined up right.”

He creates three comics a week. “I only have three funny ideas each week,” he deadpans. “Sometimes I only have two funny ideas, and that week you get one bad joke.” There are now more than 600 *xkcd* strips posted online.

Munroe generally steers away from subjects that are too serious. He has, however, created some, such as “Pix Plz,” that relate to women in geek culture. That comic talks about a need to respect women in Internet communities and how certain jokes are unacceptable. Often, he explains, when a woman joins a programming forum on the Internet, guys in the forum say something

sexist like “show us your breasts or get out.”

“They think they are being funny, but not everyone knows it’s a joke,” Munroe says. “Sooner or later, that makes you feel like you are not being looked at as a member of the community.”

The strip’s name, *xkcd*, is not an acronym for anything, he says. “It’s just a set of letters.” It started as a screen name for his AOL account. He picked four letters that didn’t mean anything or have any pronunciation. “I used that as my sign-in before the comics.”

His comics depict the experiences that “nerdy people have,” he says. “It pokes fun, but it lets people know that ‘You are not the only one that does this.’” For example, one strip jokes about people trying to figure out if the turn signal on the car in front of them is in sync with their own signal. “So many people looked at that and paid attention to that.”

In 2007, Munroe and Ohanian began talking about an *xkcd* book and publishing it in a nontraditional way, using the Web as a sales tool to give Munroe more artistic freedom and a higher stake in the royalties. “If you control it, you can decide how to make money with it,” Munroe explains, noting that he’s not ruling out the possibility of some of his books getting into bookstores. Money raised through fundraising events during the *xkcd* book tour — from auctions to ticket prices — will go toward building a school in Laos through the charity Room to Read. Ohanian says that when he asked Munroe about donating the money, the young cartoonist “was cool doing the fundraising.” At press time, \$32,000 had been raised from the book tour, and in addition to that, more than \$20,000 in commissions from sales of the book will also be donated by breadpig.

The Internet allows Munroe to aim his comics at a niche population. “Here’s a guy that could have shopped his comics around to newspapers and not gotten a single hit because it was such a niche,” Ohanian says. “Because of the ‘Net, his niche is huge. This is a prime example of talent that wouldn’t have been discovered without the Internet.”

Amend agrees. “Stick figures talking about Internet memes and science are probably pretty common in the margins of grad-school homework, but it’s a pretty unique sight in an actual comic strip. I’ve long felt that topics like math and science get minimal attention in the popular culture because the people who run newspapers and TV networks assume the audience isn’t there. The Web frees people like Randall from these traditional gatekeepers, and it’s really heartening to see people responding so positively and proving the conventional wisdom wrong.”

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