

# The New Criterion

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## The pleasures of “Asterix”

by Michael Taube

My love affair with comic strips has lasted a lifetime. From daily newspaper funnies to late nineteenth-century comic masterpieces, the occasional escape from reality always brings me welcome relief—especially during difficult times.

That’s why I was saddened to hear about the legendary cartoonist Albert Uderzo’s death on March 24 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, at the age of ninety-two.

Uderzo was the co-creator of the long-running *Asterix* comic book series with René Goscinny (who died in 1977). These cartoons detail the adventures of Asterix, Obelix, and the latter’s four-legged friend, Dogmatix. They live in Gaul—that ancient territory encompassing parts of modern France, Germany, and northern Italy, among other lands—in a tiny village that Julius Caesar’s powerful Roman army couldn’t ever defeat. The series is part of the Franco-Belgian *bande-dessinée* tradition, which includes Hergé’s *The Adventures of Tintin*, Morris’s *Lucky Luke*, and Peyo’s *The Smurfs*.

Among my favorite childhood memories are the trips I took to the public library to leaf through dog-eared *Asterix* volumes. It was a rite of passage for many Canadian children who treasured the fantasy world these comics created.

Alas, the same cannot be said for most American children. The hilarious interplay between the diminutive and heroic Asterix and the heavy-set, powerful, and loyal Obelix never quite captivated audiences here. It has been suggested that the heavy focus on European history and culture didn’t resonate with American readers, but there’s much else to appreciate about these comics, too.

I’ve always believed Americans would enjoy Goscinny and Uderzo’s masterpiece, which reached its thirty-seventh volume in 2017, if they had a different way of looking at it. One point of entry may be found by way of a less-explored subject: *Asterix*’s connection to politics.

To be fair, *Asterix* isn’t political in a partisan sense. The modern ideological concepts of Left and Right didn’t exist in 50 B.C., when this faux history takes place. But the underlying political themes are carefully wrought—and quite fascinating to discover.

There are the classic imperial tensions between Rome and Gaul. Although the former consolidated its rule over the latter during Caesar's 58 and 51 B.C. campaigns, the residents of Asterix's Gaulois village refused to give up. Thanks to a secret potion invented by the druid Getafix, these servants consistently defeat their purported masters.

As a Roman centurion said in the book *Asterix the Gladiator* (1962): "And remember, Romans, we have nothing to fear but the Gauls!" Which proves that Asterix's oft-repeated saying, "These Romans are crazy!," wasn't always on the mark.

There's also the quest for personal liberty and freedom. Asterix, Obelix, and the other villagers were freedom fighters who would beat back their oppressors as often as necessary. Yet they had no desire to recapture greater Gaul and bring down Caesar's Rome or Queen Cleopatra's Egypt. They wanted to live in peace, to hunt and eat roast boar, and to drink to their hearts' content.

The themes of slavery, religion, and race also found their way into some stories. *Asterix and the Laurel Wreath* (1971) includes scenes with the slave trader Typhus and fierce battles between slaves at the Circus Maximus. Jewish traditions are depicted in ancient Jerusalem in *Asterix and the Black Gold* (1981); at one point, Obelix expresses surprise that "pork butchers can't make a profit here." Black characters are mostly portrayed as slaves, although Baba, a lookout for a pirate crew that often cedes its ships to the Gauls (along with its dignity), is portrayed as an intelligent voice of reason.

And yes, there are a few political figures. The benevolent democratic tribal chief, Vitalstatistix, who is seen as "majestic, brave and hot-tempered" by his fellow Gauls; the pirate captain Redbeard, who lives a life of anarchy on the seven seas; the British chieftain Mykingdomforanos, who believes in preserving age-old traditions; and the Corsican chief Boneywasawarriorwayayix, a pseudo-nationalist who won't be ruled by anyone other than a fellow Corsican, fill their own ideological roles, too.

Meanwhile, in the most recent volume, *Asterix and the Chariot Race* (2017), the odds-on favorite to win the big race is named . . . Coronavirus. Life imitates art, indeed.

Uderzo's passing doesn't mean the end of *Asterix*. Two protégés, Jean-Yves Ferri and Didier Conrad, took over the series in 2012. There's plenty of time for American readers to discover what others love so much about Asterix and Obelix. New readers may kick themselves for not having discovered this wonderful series sooner. Or, better, they'll borrow that famous catchphrase from the comics: "By Toutatis!"

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