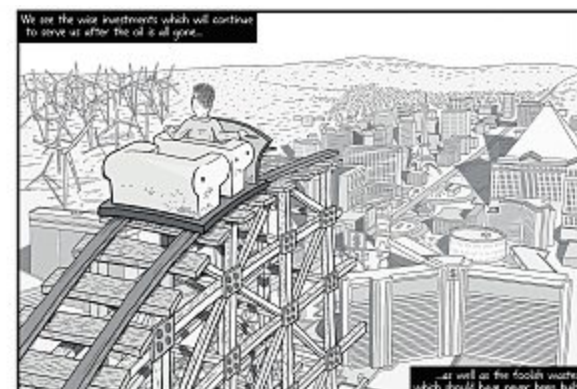
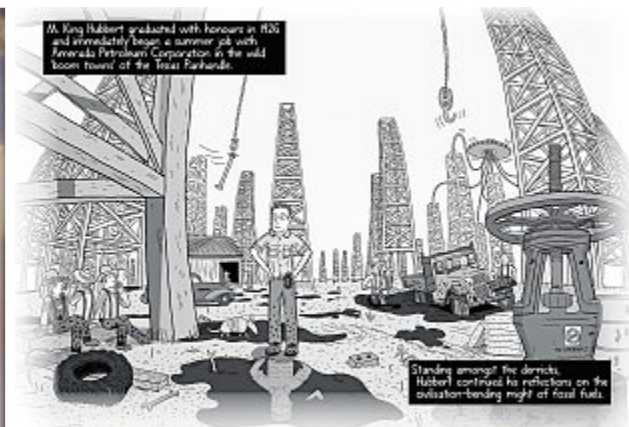


+ He draws a crowd

Stuart has returned to cartooning and is being funded over the net



Stuart McMillen reads copiously on the failings of global and Australian politics then turns his conclusions into cartoons such as these to educate his readers who are his supporters.

BY Daniel Burdon

A HIGHLIGHTER by his side, Stuart McMillen is reading a book on the failings of Australian politics, taking meticulous notes with pen in hand.

It has been a circuitous route for the former Bundaberg school student to this cafe in Yarralumla, Canberra, to talk with me about his work as an online crowd-funded cartoonist.

Bordering on the compulsive, the note-taking method reflects his forensic approach to his work, creating long-form comics that both educate and spark reflections on the society and planet we inhabit.

Part graphic novel, part non-fiction journalism, McMillen's work has been highly rated by readers on the global internet rating site Reddit and is attracting a growing community of readers online.

Delving into such subjects as the science behind drug addiction, human behaviour and animal instinct, he says his work is both an effort to dispel common myths and explain reality to his readers, who around the world are increasingly helping fund the work themselves through a recurring crowd-funding campaign on website Patreon.

His early cartoons ranged from explaining a study on how heroin addiction affects laboratory rats to the effects of introducing 29 reindeer to the then-pristine St Matthew Island.

His latest work, Peak Oil, tells the story of the discoveries of scientist M. King Hubbert, the first American scientist to have his predictions of the date when the world would reach "peak oil", in 1970, proven correct. Under the theory, peak oil was defined as the moment when the world had reached the maximum rate of extraction of oil from the earth, marking a turning point after which oil production would enter an

irreversible decline. It is just one of four such stories that will form part of a wider, 400-page comic book, titled Thermoconomics.

Other lesser-known figures McMillen plans to examine in the book include Buckminster Fuller, who popularised the unusual "geodesic dome" structures often seen at military bases; and Herman Daly an ecologist behind much of today's thinking on "sustainable development".

"I had the audacity to spend 12 months drawing this comic. Now I expect my readers to have the patience to spend 20 minutes reading the entire thing," he wrote on his blog after releasing the first part, Peak Oil, earlier this month.

“I really want the comics not to be too prescriptive for readers...”

As a day job, it is a far cry from the Brisbane office towers where he spent five years working in administration and marketing at the Red Cross Blood Service and Brisbane City Council after graduating with a degree in business management. After a hiatus from drawing during much of his schooling years, McMillen took the gamble of leaving the corporate world for the cartoonist's life about five years ago, trading Brisbane for the bush capital as his wife moved to join the public service.

"I was a bit of a cartoonist in primary school, but sort of let it slide and didn't really pick it up again until I was about 24," he says.

"I've been able to make the move easier, because I have relatively low expenses, I have been living in share houses,

and we've got no children and no mortgage."

The first year of self-employment was helped, he said, with a government incentive scheme for young entrepreneurs, which supported him with "the equivalent of the dole", so he could instead focus on comics. And focus he seems to have in spades, with each comic backed by an exhaustive research process, which he says has led him to track down scientists about 40-year-old studies they were involved in, and follow up how such issues have evolved since.

"I really want the comics not to be too prescriptive for readers; I think I'm writing about social issues or environmental issues, and people can have strong opinions about these things," he says.

"I think the main difference for my work is I'm not trying to push one view or the other, I'm just trying to explore the evidence, and then often I'll leave a comic open-ended so the reader is left to come to a conclusion themselves."

McMillen said many of his story ideas came from older books he read, where a passing reference to someone was made, which he then tried to "flesh out" in comic book form.

While his medium is the internet, the comics are far from click-bait – his latest comic, Peak Oil, could take about 20 minutes to read.

"I'd hate to put something out there that wasn't scientifically accurate or complete," he says.

Of telling the stories of obscure figures such as M. King Hubbert, McMillen says he likes the idea of "glorifying the ordinary", putting everyday people into "hero poses" and using their stories to educate readers about wider subjects. McMillen says he is inspired by American online cartoonist Joe Sacco, known for his non-fiction comic books on hefty subjects such as the Gaza conflict and the Bosnian War.

– APN Newsdesk

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