

Comics for Progressives: Coulton Waugh's *Hank*

If Aaron Sorkin had set *The Newsroom* in the 1940s, it might have been at the New York newspaper *PM*. Founded by former *Time* editor Ralph Ingersoll in 1940, the Popular Front daily tabloid was proudly anti-fascist, pro-New Deal, anti-Poll Tax, and pro-Roosevelt. Believing that advertising would compromise its editorial judgment, the paper refused to run ads, relying on department store heir Marshall Field III and other progressive investors to pay the bills. Ingersoll believed the paper would sell so many copies in its first year that it wouldn't need ads; he was wrong, but it did attract prominent readers like President Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, Vice President Henry Wallace, bandleader-composer Duke Ellington, and writer Dorothy Parker. *PM* ran articles by Parker, Ernest Hemingway, and future Speaker of the House Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill; photographs by Margaret Bourke-White and Weegee; child-rearing advice from Dr. Spock; and editorial cartoons by Carl Rose, Don Freeman, and Dr. Seuss.

Though the paper initially did not include comic strips, *PM* swiftly changed its policy and made a significant contribution to comic art. Crockett Johnson's *Barnaby*

Opposite page:
**Coulton Waugh, *Hank*,
May 11, 1945. Waugh
Family Papers, Archives
of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.**

I GOT
AN
IDEA!



Hank *by* Coulton Waugh

AN EXCITING NEW STRIP ABOUT A WAR HERO'S RETURN TO CIVILIAN LIFE

FOR RELEASE WEEK OF JULY 2, 1945



(1942–1952) had the largest impact, but Coulton Waugh's *Hank* (1945) broke new ground in its depiction of a veteran who, having lost a leg in the war, tried to adapt to life back home. As Waugh himself described his title character, Hank was “determined to find out why it [the war] had been necessary and to prevent his son from having to make such a sacrifice.”¹ In the process, he had to contend with an anti-Semitic boss and other people who hoped to convert him—as a wounded vet—into a useful spokesperson for their often dubious causes. These conflicts created an occasion for debate and exposed the bigotry (racism, anti-Semitism, red-baiting) that threatened democracy at home in the immediate postwar period. If Bill Mauldin's *Willie and Joe* cartoons offered a more trenchant look at a soldier's life on the fields of battle, *Hank's* serial narrative took the difficulties of homecoming seriously, and is (as far as I know) the first realistic strip to feature a main character who is disabled.

The comic, which Waugh called “a deliberate attempt to work in the field of social usefulness,”² complimented *PM's* coverage of vets adjusting to civilian life, and to lost limbs. Unfortunately, Waugh's groundbreaking strip lasted only eight months; eye strain prompted its creator to conclude *Hank* at the end of 1945. *PM* lasted only a few

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Opposite page:
 Coulton Waugh, *Hank*,
 July 2, 1945. Waugh
 Family Papers, Archives
 of American Art,
 Smithsonian Institution.

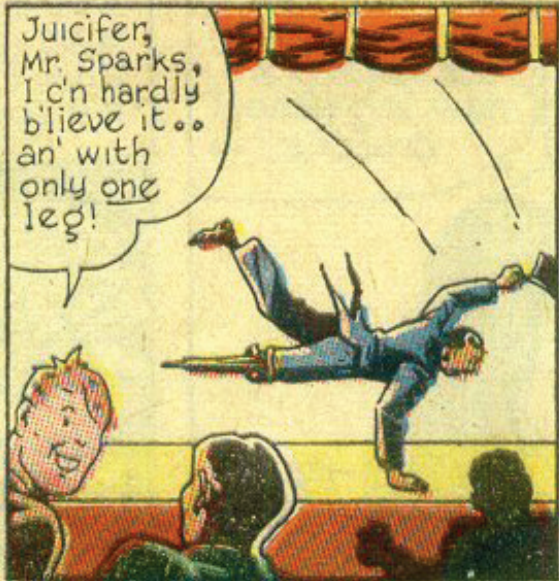
Coulton Waugh, *Hank*,
 June 23, 1945. Waugh
 Family Papers, Archives
 of American Art,
 Smithsonian Institution.

Coulton Waugh, *Hank*,
 June 25, 1945. Waugh
 Family Papers, Archives
 of American Art,
 Smithsonian Institution.



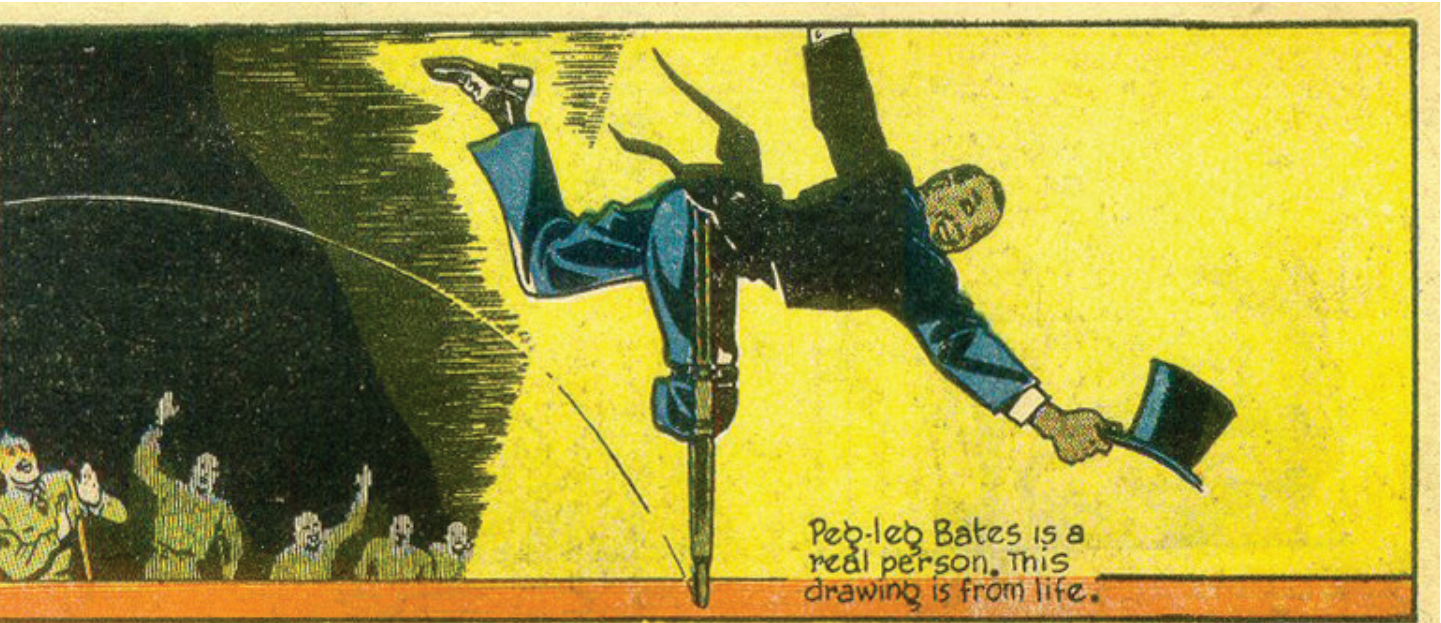
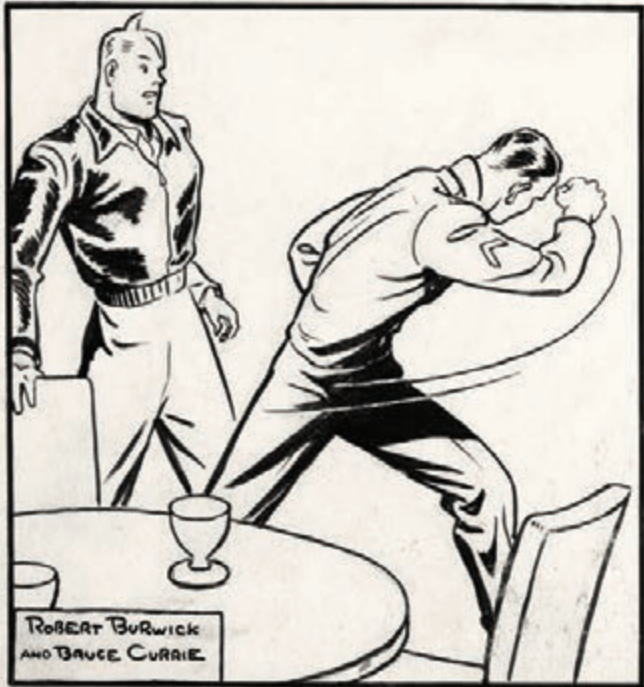
FOR RELEASE WEEK OF JUNE 25, 1945





Above:
Coulton Waugh, *Hank*,
n.d. Waugh Family
Papers, Archives
of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.

Below:
Coulton Waugh,
Hank, July 6, 1945.
Images courtesy
of YoeBooks.com.



Next spread:
Coulton Waugh,
Hank, August 1945.
Image courtesy
of YoeBooks.com.

Coulton Waugh, *Hank*,
1945. Waugh Family
Papers, Archives
of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.

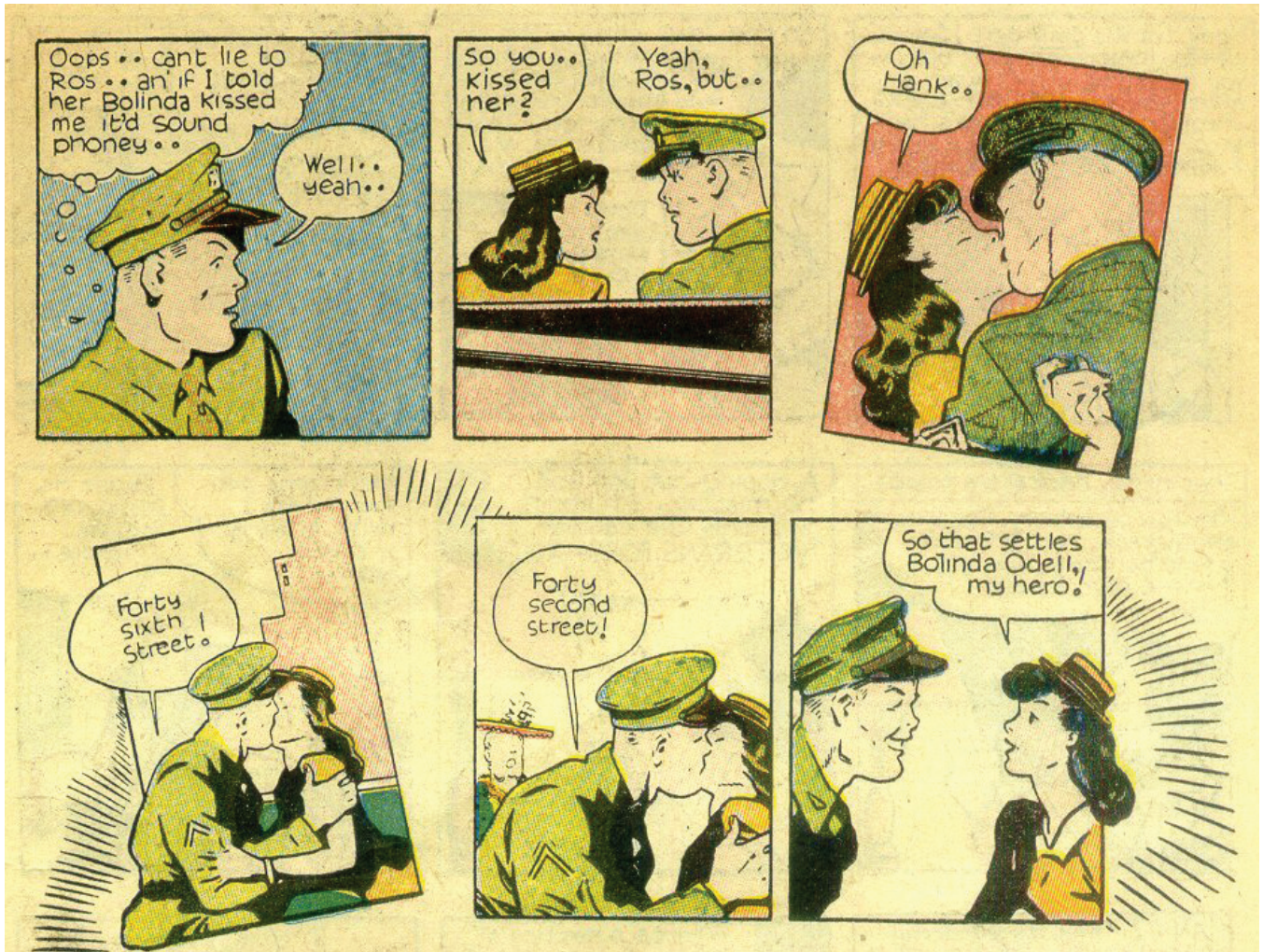
years longer. As the Popular Front coalition came unraveled after the war, progressives came under attack from the right, and publications like *PM* began to attract suspicion. Though the paper did at last accept advertising in 1946, the income wasn't enough to keep it afloat. *PM* lost its main backer and folded in June 1948.

Waugh, however, had a much longer and more varied career. Before *Hank*, he had worked as a painter, textile designer, and comics artist. He wrote and drew Milt Caniff's *Dickie Dare* from 1934 to 1944, and returned to that strip from 1950 to 1958. Just before, he created the work for which he may best be remembered today, one of the pioneering studies of the American comic strip, *The Comics*, published in 1947.³ In his later years, he continued painting and wrote articles and textbooks. Waugh died in 1973 at the age of 77, and though today his name is unfamiliar to all but the most avid comics scholar, his work—as artist, educator and comic-strip innovator—deserves to be better known. In this golden age of comic reprints, *Hank*, especially, remains a lost gem. ▣

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NOTES

- 1 Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (1947. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 214.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Waugh was not American by birth but emigrated from England with his family when he was eleven.



98th Set 9 30 1

Ros! See, I
burned your
letter...

Oh Hank! I
should never
have trusted
Aunt Hattie
with that
letter...



Coulton
Waugh