

A Walk through Hergé's Brussels

by

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The great Belgian cartoonist, Georges Rémi – alias “Hergé” – is buried in an abandoned Brussels cemetery only about a mile from where I live. The place was decommissioned long ago, in the late fifties. And as soon as the last grave-digger put down his spade, Nature moved in.

It's not easy to spot Hergé's tomb amidst all the rampant overgrowth. But venture down one of the deserted alleys, and you'll find him. Special dispensation was given in 1983 to bury him here. Someone has swept the pink granite slab, and watered the begonias. It's surreal, this clean-cut oasis, tucked away in the ruined necropolis. It's as if Tintin's creator had drawn the grave himself; as if the hand that pioneered those famous crisp lines on paper had one final, wry comment to make in stone.

The path that led Hergé to this resting place criss-crossed seventy-six years, and at least half a dozen of the nineteen districts of Brussels - which is nothing, of course, compared to the five continents traversed by his imagination. In the twenty-four books of the Tintin series, Hergé's intrepid boy adventurer journeys to Tibet and Congo; to the Soviet Union, Peru, and America. Even to the moon! But it was the gritty streets of his hometown, Brussels, that first set the cartoonist's mind roving. You won't find these on the standard Hergé tour. There are no museums on this route; no Tintin boutiques, or statues of the boy in knickerbockers – instantly recognizable - with his white fox terrier, Snowy.

How Belgian is Tintin? Well, let's wander for a moment through some of Hergé's old haunts.

We're strolling along the stately Avenue de la Couronne now, near his birthplace. All around, you'll see the fading bourgeois universe that was old Brussels. Ornate townhouses soar five stories. In Hergé's day, the dusty doors would have been polished, the sidewalks washed. At each entrance, a little iron bar is set into the stonework to scrape muddy shoes on. Such old-world propriety is made fun of everywhere in Tintin: in the antics of a butler; in the prim hair-dos, blown to pieces by a soprano's high C; in monocles, walrus moustaches, bowler hats. These have all vanished from the streets, of course. But the people? They're still here, if you look.

Over there, a barrel-hipped woman is lumbering onto a tram. Her bosom is like the prow of a ship. You have the feeling that if she opened her mouth, her voice would hit like shrapnel. Hergé

must have plucked her right off the cobbled street sixty years ago. For this could be Bianca Castafiore herself, his insufferable diva.

Exit the tram at the university, and a nervous, balding gentleman stumbles into you. He glares, but excuses himself. So terribly Belgian! And somehow familiar...Why, yes, it's Hergé's loopy Professor Calculus in the flesh, searching for a brainstorm, no doubt! Tintin characters seem to be on every corner now. Look at that boy, walking a small white terrier! Could it be....? Perhaps.

There's a twinge of the absurd in these scenes: a gentle irony behind the dour Belgian aspect that most visitors don't see at first glance. Hergé caught it in his works bare-handed.

We're in the leafy district of Boitsfort now. During the Second World War, Hergé was sketching an imposing house here for the residence of his Professor Tarragon when he realized it was a Gestapo headquarters. The cartoonist slunk away just in time, unnoticed. But that's the house, up there: number 6, Avenue Delleur.

Cross the forest, and you're back near the cemetery again. This is a hushed, exclusive area. Large houses peep from the end of long drives. Hergé's last residence is one of them. You can stand at the gate and just make out his terrace, at number 37.

The cemetery closes at dusk. But visit the pink granite tomb once more before leaving. All that dark, dense ivy; the cracked sepulchres: Hergé would undoubtedly have set a new Tintin adventure here. For his legions of fans, it would be a terrific use of eternity if he did.