

BOOK
ANNI VERSARY

OCTOBER 25, 2009. SUNDAY MID DAY
www.mid-day.com

ASTERIX
TRIVIA

Uderzo, the illustrator, has been working on the comics alone since Goscinny's death in 1977. However, all *Asterix* books that have appeared so far carry both names "as a mark of respect" from Uderzo.

Asterix and Obelix appeared on the cover of *Time* Magazine for a special edition on 'The New France' in 1991.

One of the most popular books in the series, '*Asterix and Cleopatra*' has two movie versions — in cartoon form in 1968 and with actors in 2002 ('*Asterix and Obelix: Mission Cleopatra*').

There is a theme park near Paris based on this series — Parc Astérix — which is said to be as popular as neighbouring Disneyland.

THE GAULS MUST BE CRAZY

Asterix, Obelix and the indomitable Gauls have entertained us for 50 years now. **Charukesi Ramadurai** looks back with affection at the Gauls who feared nothing but the sky falling on their heads

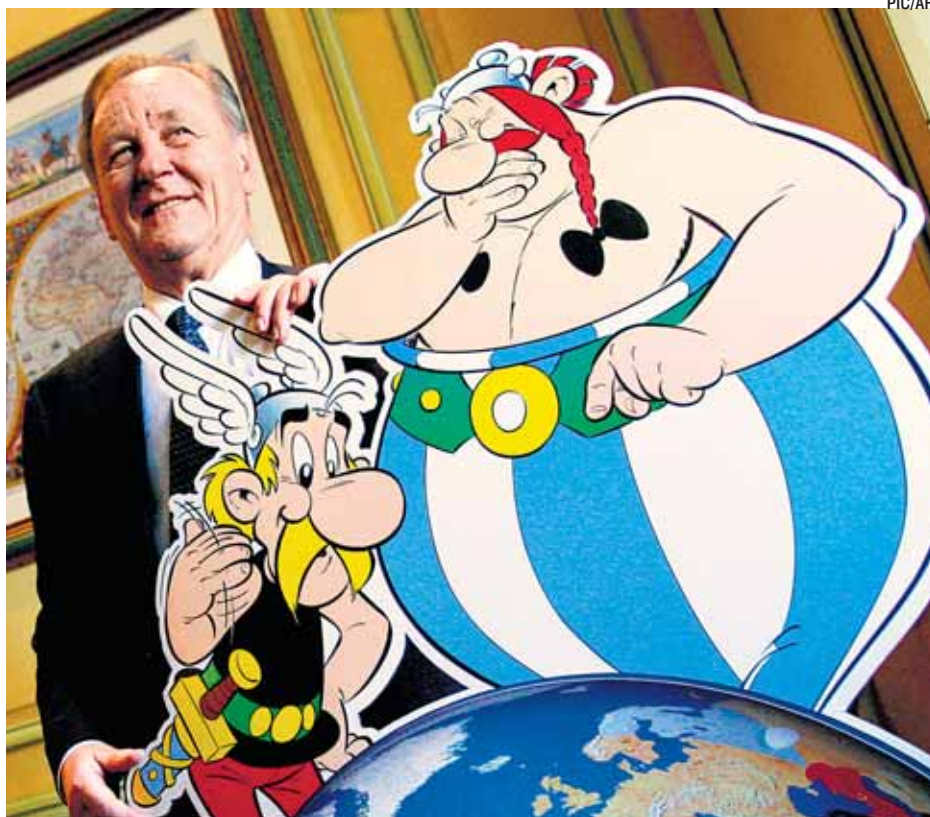
I don't know what reading *Asterix* as a child did for you, but it gave me a warped understanding of history. For the longest time, what I knew of world history and geography was what I read in *Asterix* comics. Oh, I did learn stuff at school, but I was never convinced they knew what they were talking about. The *Asterix* version came into my life earlier, and it was a lot more fun. So I knew that good old Julius and Cleopatra were an item (and nary a mention of Mark Antony). I knew the secret behind the broken nose of the Sphinx: it chipped while Obelix clambered up ('*Asterix and Cleopatra*'), didn't it? And the mystery of Stonehenge? Why, isn't that the collection of menhirs that Unhygienix, the fishmonger ('*Asterix in Spain*') used to beautify his empty land in Salisbury Plain?

Reading the comics again as an adult, I admired and chuckled over the clever way these startling revelations appear in the books as casual throw-away lines. I never could, and still cannot, view Julius Caesar with anything approaching respect, say what you will about his great conquests. And I have nothing but devotion for Cleopatra, even with her scheming and murdering her way to the throne. All that stays with me is the image of her nose, pretty enough to floor the venerable druid Getafix himself.

The Asterix chronicles

On October 29, 1959, Asterix and his inseparable friend Obelix first appeared in the pages of the magazine *Pilote* in France. Fifty years on, *Asterix* continues to kick (occupying Roman) a** with the same panache he exhibited in his first adventure as *Asterix, the Gaul*. I think part of what makes the characters so lovable is that they never take anything seriously.

Unlike Tintin (the rivalry between Asterix and Tintin fans is legendary; Vikram Seth, in his novel in verse '*The Golden Gate*', clearly gives a thumbs up for the latter, to my eternal disappointment), Asterix does not rush off to the save the world from wily, power-hungry villains. He is happy hunting boar with his friend Obelix and chipping in (with the help of the druid's magic potion) to save his village, or friends in trouble when required. And although Obelix does say sadly ('*Asterix and the Roman Agent*') "no-one ever explains anything to me — they just keep me around because I'm ornamental", he is usually happy to follow Asterix in his adventures without a question.



Uderzo with his creations, Asterix and Obelix

The cover of the eagerly anticipated golden anniversary *Asterix* book captures this spirit; it shows Asterix and Obelix in splits, pointing to their golden statues. Somewhat like their creators, René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo, who caricatured and made fun of the best of them. From Sean Connery as Agent Dubbelosix in '*Asterix and The Black Gold*' (can you ever take James Bond seriously after this, Martinis and mean machines notwithstanding?) to The Rolling Menhirs and Elvis Preslix in '*Asterix and the Normans*' (the more famous contemporaries of our Bard Cacophonix) and Benito Mussolini as the short and screaming Centurion Nebulus Nimbus in '*Asterix and the Big Fight*', the duo was merciless.

All in good fun, though. Even the Brits found it impossible to take offence. Given the history of antagonism between the French and the English, the authors tendered an advance apology when '*Asterix in Britain*' was first published, "As usual, we caricature what we are fond of, and we are fond of the British, in spite of their strange way of putting Nelson on top of their columns instead of Napoleon." And surely enough, the title sold more copies in Britain than any other! It was perhaps to

demonstrate this fondness that Goscinny and Uderzo modelled Mykingdomforanos, the brave English chieftain who held out against invaders, on Winston Churchill (with red hair and moustache).

Crossing the English Channel

The 33 *Asterix* books are available today in over a 100 languages but entry into the English market proved to be a demanding task for the authors. Of this, Antony Kamm, the first English editor of the *Asterix* comics writes that two British publishers including Methuen, who published *Tintin*, had turned it down fearing that humour based on puns would not translate well. The article (sourced here from the website 'Asterix NZ') titled "Whatever Happened to Little Oleg: Brockhampton Press in the Sixties" also mentions that the *Times Literary Supplement* covered Asterix in the front page in its children's books issue sometime in the early 1970s, immediately spiking its popularity.

However, frivolous children's comics these are not. The level of humour in the *Asterix* comics is sophisticated and ingenious. If as a child, I fell in love with the striking visuals and funny characters with their strange costumes and activities,

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as an adult, I grew to appreciate the wordplay in *Asterix*. Starting from the first tentative '*Asterix in Gaul*', each of the books contains several layers of meaning; true *Asterix* devotees will agree that new puns emerge with each repeat reading.

Anthea Bell, in the piece '*Asterix, my love*' that lateral thinking was required to ensure that the humour did not get lost in translation. The clever French names have accordingly been translated to convey the humour in English; Obelix's dog Idéfix (of a fixed idea) is Dogmatix (having a dogma, also indicating dog) in English. For this reason, the Hindi rendition, 'Kutta Bhounkix' does not pack quite the same punch (nor does 'Hakim Vaidix' for the veteran druid Getafix!).

In an interview on the BBC website, Uderzo doubtfully attributes the popularity of the *Asterix* comics to "the revenge of the small against the strong, which the audience can relate to." While this could be true of any superhero comic, what works for *Asterix* is that the wit is topical yet timeless. For instance, in '*Obelix and Co.*', a biting satire on capitalism, Caius Preposterus (a graduate of the LSE — Latin School of Economics) is employed to turn an utterly useless product (menhirs) into a coveted object of desire; a role that all contemporary marketing professionals will empathise with.

And then those names! My personal favourites are — Centurion Chrismusbonus (the first *Asterix* villain — in '*Asterix the Gaul*'), Squareonthepotenuse (the crooked architect in '*The Mansions of the Gods*'), Vitriolix (code name H2So4 — Caesar's spy in '*Asterix and the Black Gold*'), Ptenisnet (Egyptian volunteer, translator of hieroglyphics in '*Asterix the Legionary*'), Ekonomikrisis (the Phoenician sailing merchant who appears in several books), Valueaddetax (British druid friend of Getafix — in '*Asterix and the Goths*') and Centurion Gaius Veriambitius (pushing Legionary Gluteus Maximus — named after the buttock muscle — towards fame and fortune at the Olympic Games).

So after 50 years of bashing up the baddies, hunting and roasting boars and travelling around the world, Asterix and Obelix are not tired. Nor are the admirers; look forward to the special anniversary collection '*Asterix: The Golden Book*'.

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