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CELEBRITIES & TV 6:22 p.m. Thursday, December 9, 2010

Text size:

Comics reporter Brenda Starr leaving the biz

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By SOPHIA TAREEN
The Associated Press

CHICAGO — No more late nights or looming deadlines for globetrotting reporter Brenda Starr.



FILE - In this February 1998 file photo, Dale Messick, creator of the redheaded comic heroine "Brenda Starr," poses for a photograph at her home in Oakmont, Calif. Messick, whose strip ran in 250 newspapers at its peak in the 1950s, died in April 2005. Tribune Media Services, which owns Brenda Starr, said Thursday, Dec. 9, 2010, it will end the feature's newspaper syndication. Chicago Tribune columnist Mary Schmich and artist June Brigman said they've decided it was time to end their work on the seven-day-a-week strip which now appears in about three dozen newspapers. The final episode of the soap opera cartoon will be published Jan. 2. (AP Photo/Michael Amsler, File)

The redheaded comic heroine, whose first appearance came in a June 1940 Chicago Tribune insert, is putting the notebook away for good next month. Tribune Media Services, which owns Brenda Starr, announced Thursday that it's ending the feature's newspaper syndication.

Chicago Tribune columnist Mary Schmich and artist June Brigman said they've decided it was time to end their work on the seven-day-a-week strip which appears in about three dozen newspapers. The final episode of the soap opera cartoon created by the late Dale Messick will be published Jan. 2.

"It's been an incredible privilege to be able to live life through this medium all these years," said Schmich, who has written the comic for 25 years. "I'm a reporter, above all, so I always use Brenda in a funny way to report things."

When Brenda, who works for The Flash, went to India or Mount Everest on an adventure, Schmich studied as much as she could about those places. The strip was also a way to comment on the changing industry — like with the Internet star character of Rat Sludge, a thinly-veiled caricature of Matt Drudge — and the roles of working women.

The cartoon is a rarity in the world of comics, with a strong female lead role and a female-dominated creative team, originating in a time when the workplace wasn't as friendly to women. Messick was a New York greeting-card artist who changed her name from Dalia in the 1940s so her work would be better noticed.

Ramona Fradon inherited the strip from Messick before Schmich started in 1985. Brigman has illustrated the cartoon since 1995, after taking over from Linda Sutter.

The loss of Brenda Starr marks the second starring a strong female — and redheaded — character for Tribune Media Services. The Chicago-based company announced in June that Annie, which debuted in 1924, would be no more.

Brenda Starr "girl reporter" has evolved from what Schmich describes as a "weepier, girlier ditzier" character where most



This undated image provided Dec. 9, 2010, by Tribune Media Services, Inc., shows the comic strip character "Brenda Starr" that was created for promotion of the feature. Tribune Media Services, which owns Brenda Starr, said Thursday, Dec. 9, 2010, it will end the feature's newspaper

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syndication. The redheaded comic heroine's first appearance came in a June 1940 Chicago Tribune insert. The final episode of the soap opera cartoon created by the late Dale Messick will be published Jan. 2. (AP Photo/Tribune Media Services, Inc.) NO SALES



FILE - This Nov. 5, 1975 file photo shows Dale Messick, creator of the comic strip "Brenda Starr," looking up from some her strips in her studio in her apartment in Chicago. Tribune Media Services, which owns Brenda Starr, said Thursday, Dec. 9, 2010, it will end the feature's newspaper syndication. The redheaded comic heroine's first appearance came in a June 1940 Chicago Tribune insert. (AP Photo/Charles E. Knoblock, File)

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plot lines revolved around her love life to a (slightly) more serious character, closer to what a reporter would be today.

"Brenda was always aware it could be difficult in the world and the newsroom to be a woman, but she always made it work," Schmich said.

The change in character has also been reflected in the way Brenda has been drawn, from accessorized and brightly-colored fitted skirt suits in the early decades to more functional slacks and jackets in more recent years.

"She's a little more down to earth, probably dresses more for function," said Brigman, who began drawing the strip in 1995 after illustrating comic books for DC, Dark Horse and Marvel, including the latter's critically lauded "Power Pack" series. "She has style and she just doesn't look as flamboyant."

But that doesn't mean the strip has been completely tame.

Both Brigman and Schmich say their favorite character was The Flash's gossip columnist, Gabby VanSlander, a smart, gossipy and bold woman who's often depicted with a cigarette.

"She was a lot fun. She was so outrageous," Brigman said. "We also got mail complaining about this character smoking. But she was so stubborn. Despite all the anti-smoking (campaign) out there, she was never going give it up."

The strip's reach — spanning seven decades of global adventures — is obvious.

At its peak in the 1950s it appeared in more than 250 newspapers worldwide. But numerous fan pages are still devoted to the comic and 1989 feature film "Brenda Starr" with Brooke Shields in the lead role. There are still dolls available for purchase of another memorable character, Brenda Starr's ex-husband Basil St. John, who was noted for his black eye patch and orchid serum he needed to take.

It's even inspired writers like Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Anna Quindlen.

"I originally became interested in journalism because I read Brenda in the late lamented Philadelphia Bulletin," Quindlen wrote in an e-mail to The Associated Press. "She had red hair, stars in her eyes (literally), and a dishy boyfriend with an eyepatch named Basil St. John. Sounded like a plan to me. Later on I embraced the allure of deadline storytelling and the professional obligation to ask strangers rude questions."

Quindlen said being featured in the comic was one of the high points of her professional life and a copy of it still hangs over her desk.

"Brenda Starr will best be remembered for her ability to combine glamour, intrigue, romance and family with the strains of balancing a full-time job-not unlike many women today," Tribune Media Services said in a statement.

But Brenda fans rest assured, she won't be gone for good.

Tribune officials said the first volume of a collection of the comic's daily and Sunday strips called, "Brenda Starr, Reporter by Dale Messick: The Collected Daily and Sunday Newspaper Strips" is due out in June in a hardback edition to be published by Hermes Press.

Associated Press writer Matt Moore in Philadelphia contributed to this report.

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