

## Cowabunga, dudes

### Northwestern lecturer ties 'Simpsons' to cultural lessons

By Patrick Kampert  
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ANTHONY ROBERT LAPENNA • KRT CAMPUS

Mmmmm, doughnuts. Homer Simpson would have felt right at home at the Comix Revolution store in Evanston, Ill., recently.

He could have spent the afternoon devouring the Krispy Kremes and Dunkin' Donuts piled atop the table in front of the cash register.

But he wouldn't have known what to make of the highbrow discussion going on between a Northwestern University professor and 40 people about censorship, satire and the arts.

It was probably just as well. They were talking about Homer and his family, and we all know how insecure he can get.

Northwestern's Bill Savage, a lecturer in the English department and an administrator in the dean's office, is one of the contributors to the new book "Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture" (Wayne State University Press, \$21.95).

The book takes a scholarly yet humorous look at how "The Simpsons" can remain so popular and yet be countercultural at the same time.

Or, as Savage told his guests: "Can you have something made by an evil multinational conglomerate — not to put it politely — and at the same time say something serious about multinational conglomerates and how they've affected our world?"

Savage says "The Simpsons" frequent digs at the Fox network and the American establishment help it sidestep its status as a Hollywood heavyweight.

But despite its success as the longest-running sitcom on TV, he contends that animation still gets a bad rap in the United States as a childish art form.

"This is really an American cultural bias that doesn't apply in other countries," he said.

Savage and many scholars increasingly see "The Simpsons" as a top-notch social and political satire. No one is exempt from its zingers, whether it's environmentalists or religious conservatives.

He says its up-to-the-minute cultural allusions, from "Survivor" to medicinal marijuana, make it just as effective in working on multiple levels as the classic novel "Gulliver's Travels" was almost three centuries ago.

"Jonathan Swift wrote that as an absolutely vicious satire of the British culture of his day," Savage pointed out. "But you can also read it as a story about

a guy with the giant and the little people. If you read Swift's book with annotations, then you can go, 'Ah, I see.' In the culture today, you don't need footnotes; you just need to be hip to what 'The Simpsons' are doing."

Amid the pretzels and boxes of Munchkins, Savage treated the guests to a viewing of the episode "Itchy, Scratchy and Marge."

The episode features matriarch Marge Simpson's successful campaign to tone down cartoon violence.

Marge became appalled when baby Maggie bashed Homer in the head with a hammer after watching cartoon characters use mallets on each other. But when Springfield residents ask Marge to lead another censorship battle to protest Michelangelo's naked sculpture of David arriving on tour in the town, she doesn't see what the fuss is about.

Afterward, audience members questioned Savage about censorship.

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— Ben Savage  
lecturer at Northwestern University

One guest complained that the federal government recently cut closed-captioning funding for dozens of TV shows, including "The Simpsons."

Another noted the parallels between this episode, which was from the show's second season, and current events as the Federal Communications Commission and radio companies try to crack down on shock jocks such as Howard Stern.

Savage said he hates Stern's show but finds Rush Limbaugh equally offensive.

"If I was in charge, I know whose show I would take off the air," he said. "Neither of them."

The majority of the crowd at Comix Revolution was about as old as grade schoolers Bart or Lisa Simpson when the show arrived on the scene, first as part of "The Tracey Ullman Show" in 1987, and then when it became a stand-alone series in 1989.

Jennifer Johannesen, a Northwestern University graduate student, said it took time for the show to grow on her.

"In the beginning, it was all about 'Do the Bartman' or about the T-shirts that said 'Eat my shorts,'" she said. "When I got into high school and college, the subtlety of it was more apparent to me and that's when I started enjoying it."

Dave Weigel, a senior at Northwestern, didn't need to warm up to the show. He said he remembers watching "Ullman" with his parents and eagerly anticipating the debut of "The Simpsons" as a series.

"I've been watching it ever since then. If I miss an episode, it's because I have a medical emergency," he joked.

He spent some time in the store examining a plush toy of Shake, one of the fast-food heroes of "Aqua Teen Hunger Force" from Cartoon Network's "Adult Swim."

Weigel said that the ironic and self-referential



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Top: Bill Savage, a Northwestern University lecturer, introduces the book "Leaving Springfield" to the audience.

Bottom: Amy Danzer watches an episode of "The Simpsons" prior to the discussion at Comix Revolutions store in Evanston, Ill.

humor of the "Adult Swim" shows owes a big debt to Homer and family. He says he's confident "The Simpsons" will get its due when history weighs in on the matter.

"The only thing that's keeping them from being a piece of art like 'Don Quixote' or 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' is a couple hundred years," he said.

Actually, the wait may not be that long.

Savage, for example, may be teaching a class on pop culture — including "The Simpsons" — starting next year.

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