

By Don Vaughan

The Not-So-Funny Pages

Funky Winkerbean creator **Tom Batiuk** has never been one to shy away from important social issues. Over the years, the former high school teacher has used the popular strip to address teen pregnancy, alcoholism, teen suicide and a variety of other topics that you'll never see in *Blondie* or *Beetle Bailey*.

It's the topic of cancer, however, that has garnered Batiuk the most attention. In a lengthy storyline that concluded in October, a primary character named **Lisa Moore** died from a recurrence of breast cancer. >



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LISA'S CANCER STORY began in 1999, when she found a lump in her right breast.

Lisa's remission, five years out:



Lisa receives her five-year survivor pin

Her recurrence seven years later:



Lisa learns of her recurrence just before she leaves for vacation



Pulling out the old wig from her first cancer treatment



Lisa finds out she was misinformed about the progress of her disease

The story deeply affected many of *Funky Winkerbean's* estimated 50 million readers.

SOME WERE ANGRY at Batiuk for killing off a character they had come to know and love. Others praised him for raising cancer awareness and approaching the topic in a poignant and realistic way.

"Tom is well-known in the field for introducing controversial, discussion-producing storylines that are especially effective because his characters are so compelling," observes Maggie Thompson, senior editor of *The Comics Buyer's Guide*, a monthly magazine that covers the comics industry.

"What he has done with Lisa is truly unique. Death in the comic strips is highly unusual because most creators are unwilling to give up a character like that."

According to Thompson, Lisa Moore's death may be the first time a comic strip character has succumbed to cancer, but it's not the first time the disease has been depicted in comic form. Harvey Pekar explored his battle with lymphoma in the critically acclaimed graphic novel *Our Cancer Year*, and Brian Fies chronicled his mother's fight with metastatic lung cancer in the Internet strip *Mom's Cancer*, which was later published in book form.

A PERSONAL CONNECTION For Batiuk, cancer has become a very personal topic. In 2003, at age 56, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer and underwent surgery. Two years later he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and had his thyroid gland removed.

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Tom Batiuk, two-time cancer survivor, in his studio

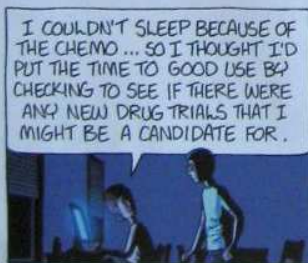
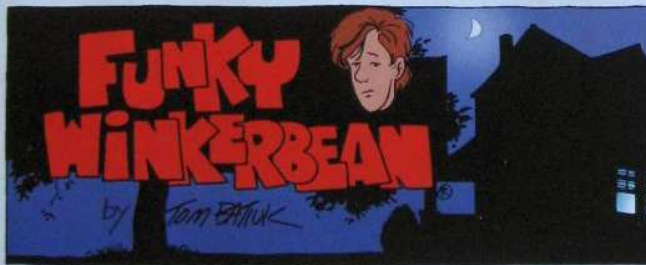
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BATIUK says that writing about Lisa’s fictional cancer helped him confront his own real-life disease. “Encountering something in a fantasy realm can be instructional and help prepare you for when you bump into it in the real world,” he says. “That was the case with me. Because of the reading I had been doing, I knew how to get started in obtaining information. I also knew that early detection was important and that cancer is curable if caught early enough.

“Having cancer also made me aware that there is a vulnerability I hadn’t paid much attention to before. It made me more conscious of using my time well.”

LISA’S STORY Lisa Moore’s cancer experience began in 1999 with the discovery of a lump in her right breast. On her doctor’s advice, she opted to have a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy. She used Chinese herbal therapy to help ease the accompanying nausea.

Throughout her treatment, Lisa was supported by Holly Budd, a fellow cancer survivor who had attended high



Lisa comes to grips with her cancer recurrence in front of a computer screen

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school with Lisa; Lisa's husband, Les; and their friends, who readily pitched in to help the couple. Batiuk pulled no punches over the course of the story, depicting Lisa as sad, depressed and exhausted throughout her ordeal. But the story ended on a happy note with Lisa receiving a five-year survivor pin from her breast cancer support group.

The second story arc picked up seven years later, with Lisa learning via participation in a gene research study that her cancer had returned. She began treatment and was led to believe that the cancer was responding well. Later, however, she learned that there had been a mix-up with her scans and that the disease had actually progressed.

Lisa began chemotherapy again, and at the same time decided she wanted to get in touch with the son she gave up for adoption while in high school. Later, her oncologist told her the chemotherapy had been ineffective and she had only months to live. After much soul searching, Lisa decided to quit chemotherapy so she could enjoy the short time she had left.

As Lisa's health progressively declined, she was reunited with the son she gave up for adoption, and traveled to Washington to testify before Congress on the need for greater cancer research funding. Finally, as the disease took her life, she told Les that she loved him one last time before Death, in the form of a man wearing a tuxedo and a theatrical mask, led her away.

COVERING EMOTIONAL TERRITORY Batiuk saw Lisa's first bout with breast cancer as an opportunity to tell a strong story and encourage readers to pursue early cancer detection. He conducted extensive research on breast cancer, its treatment and its effects on patients, and had the strip vetted for accuracy by experts with the National Alliance of Breast Cancer Organizations.

The decision to have Lisa experience a recurrence of cancer came as a result of his own cancer experience, Batiuk says.



A reflection on the skills a caregiver needs



Les tells Lisa that it's OK to let go



Lisa's father makes amends for old wounds

"I realized there is a huge difference between empathizing with something and experiencing it personally," he explains. "I knew there was emotional territory I had not covered before, that there was a deeper, more hard-won story to be told. The decision to have Lisa die, I think, was just an extension of that. If I was going to tell the story again, I needed a better reason for revisiting it other than just to tell another cancer story. I thought, let's tell the ultimate story and see what happens, because that's a cancer story, too."

King Features, which syndicates *Funky Winkerbean* to nearly 400 newspapers in the United States, initially asked Batiuk to reconsider having Lisa die, but ultimately supported that creative decision. Many of his readers, however, did not — and were quick to let Batiuk know they felt betrayed.

"A lot of readers were upset because I had violated their

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Lisa's wish near the end is to see the fall leaves



Death appears in a tuxedo and a theatrical mask

predetermined definition of what comics are supposed to be," Batiuk notes. "And then I started hearing from people who were seeing their own lives reflected back at them, or were seeing things they thought were accurate or touching."

Batiuk was interviewed about Lisa's cancer on TheCancerBlog.com, and reader posts were sometimes vehement. One reader, whose daughter had stage 4 breast cancer, wrote: "Every morning [my grandchildren] read your work and get the message that their mother will die. How dare you inflict such pain on my grandchildren, my daughter and on my family?"

But for every outraged response, there were letters of support, such as the reader who commented: "As someone who lost a close friend to breast cancer that had metastasized..., I applaud Mr. Batiuk for his courage. Cancer is a big threat and if it takes a comic strip to wake us up, then so be it."

The tipping point for many readers was the strip in which Lisa tells Les that she had decided to stop chemotherapy.

"That really set off a bit of a firestorm," Batiuk says. "At that point, it became apparent to a lot of people that Lisa would not live, and I put some comments on my website to let people know as well (www.funkywinkerbean.com). I thought it was time to get to that point because there were a lot of well-intentioned people who said they wanted to see a miracle, and I wanted [to tell them] that I thought there was a miracle in the story, just not the type of miracle they were looking for."

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Though Lisa is dead, she will continue to have a presence in *Funky Winkerbean*, says Batiuk, who works a year ahead on the strip. He cites, for example, a sequence in which we see Les, who has aged 10 years, sitting on a bench talking with Lisa, who still looks the way she did when she was alive and healthy. In the last panel, it is revealed that Les has been sitting alone the whole time.

"Lisa's spirit is something Les will sort of commune with, someone he will talk to," Batiuk explains. "Even though she's not there, Lisa will become a sounding board for him because he's now a single parent trying to raise a daughter."

Lisa will also have an enduring presence within the strip via the annual Lisa's Legacy Making Strides Against Cancer Walk, which Batiuk plans to feature in *Funky Winkerbean* every October. And she will also be seen via the video recordings that she made for her daughter, Summer.

Batiuk has collected the entire chronicle of Lisa's fight with cancer in *Lisa's Story: The Other Shoe* (The Kent State University Press). Royalties from its sale will go to the University Hospitals Ireland Cancer Center, which has established the Lisa's Legacy Fund for Cancer Research and Education.

"This was a wonderful opportunity, not only to provide money for cancer research but also to have the character of Lisa live on and make a contribution in real life," says Batiuk. **H**

Don Vaughan is a health and medical writer based in Raleigh, N.C.



Tom Batiuk has collected Lisa's story into a book. Proceeds will benefit cancer research and education.