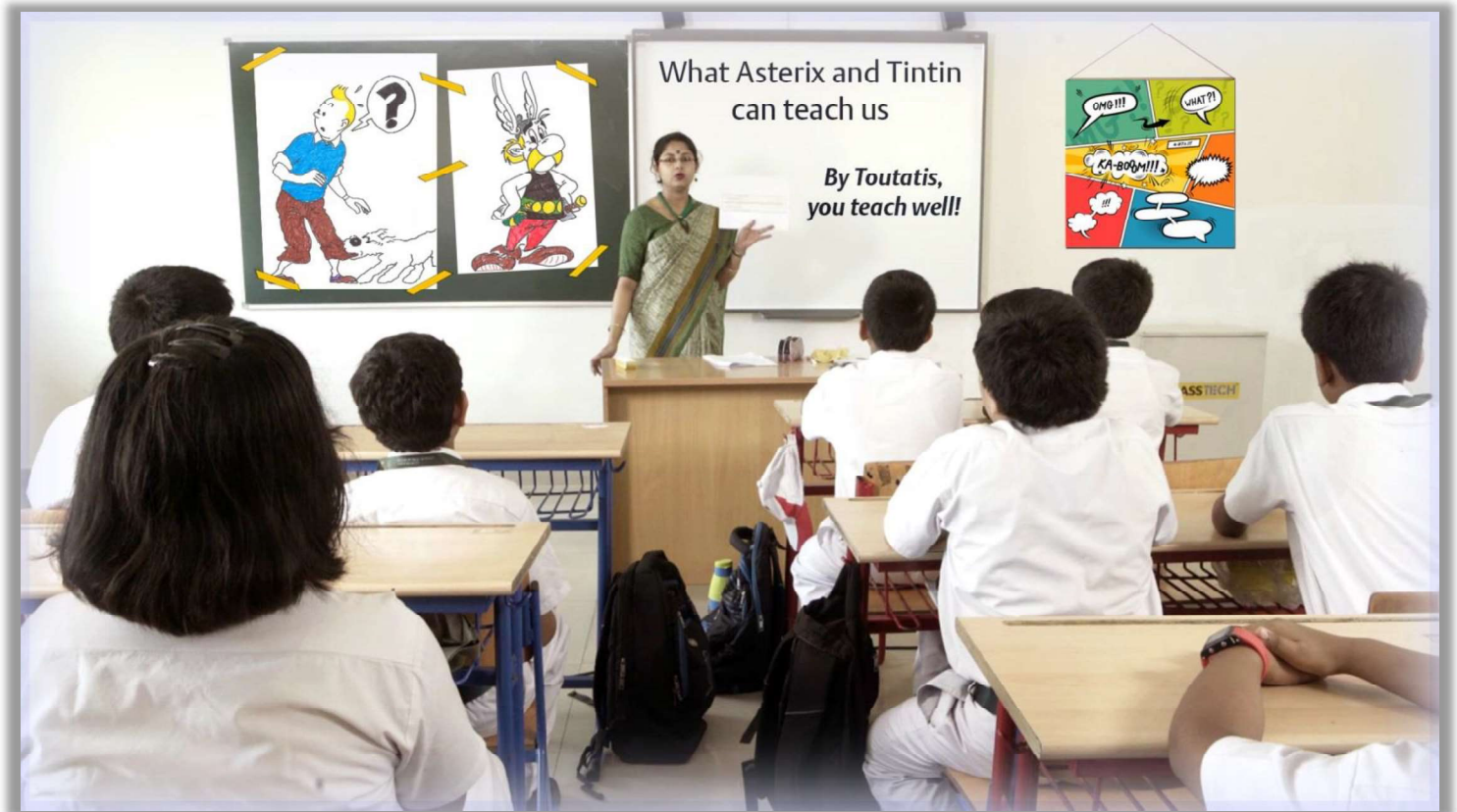


*By Toutatis, they teach well!*

## What Asterix and Tintin can teach us

*Sujata C*



Way back in the 1970s and 80s parents and teachers frowned upon children reading comics as those supposedly used slang, lurid images, crass humour and incorrect language. Books were meant to be read to develop the right language skills necessary in life. Of course, that logic of our elders never stopped us from reading comics.

Asterix and Tintin were the cultural and literary heroes of France. One was set in history and the other was contemporary, but both were enjoyed by a wide range of readers and were rage from school kids to young professionals. Each Asterix comic took nearly a year to create so there was enough time to save up for it. They were eagerly awaited much like the Bollywood blockbusters of today. There was the customary trip to the bookshop where we would offer our savings to the shopkeeper and come back home with our precious purchase. The

first round of reading would be in a group as everyone wanted to read it; so all siblings or a group of friends would be pouring over one book. The joy of laughing at the jokes together later became cherished memories. You could always ask the meaning of phrase or expression that you did not understand from someone in the group. The book was then reread at leisure, marvelling at the caricatures and savouring the humour to get carried away into a world of predictability, simplicity, valour, honour and fun. We were hooked to the humour, and without realising, we got hooked to reading.



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## The Popularity of Asterix

Asterix comics are of French origin written by Goscinny and Uderzo. The protagonists are two characters, Asterix and Obelix who live in a village in Gaul, now modern day France. The two make an odd pair, each with his endearing eccentricities. One is an oversized menhir sculptor and delivery boy who fell into a vat of magic potion as a baby and grew up to have super human strength. Asterix is the short and intelligent warrior who carries his hip flask of magic potion taking a swig every time there are Roman soldiers to be fought. The stories are set at the time of Julius Caesar, the Roman Emperor who was constantly invading his neighbouring regions. The Gauls spent a good amount of their time resisting its occupation by the Romans.

That humour knows no boundaries is evident from the fact that while Asterix comics have been translated into 115 languages, its humour has been retained.

The English translations of Asterix are done by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockeridge.

To fully understand and appreciate Asterix comics, one needs to have some idea of European history, politics and culture. That's a tall order. The comic captures many commonly held ideas about the region and time. The Goths or Germans are seen as disciplined but war-loving; the Greeks have large families and are ready to recommend a cousin who is just right for a job; the Corsicans never miss their siesta; the Normans love their drink and are fearless, probably because they are used to long nights of six months; the Belgians cannot stand the Gauls; the English are always relaxed and peaceful tea lovers, always ready to talk about the weather; the Scots love their kilts with no tolerance for hypocrisy and extravagance. Then there are the people from the Middle East like Babylon, Assyria and Sumer who think all strangers are their enemies and attack them. Of course none of us had this insight into ethnic stereotypes as children, but as we read we guessed that people of different regions were typified for certain things.

### **What's in a name?**

Even if one is not familiar with the European political history and its nuances, these comics can still be enjoyed for their humour especially the ones embedded in the names to reflect the personality of the character. The names of Gauls end with *ix*, like Getafix is the druid who makes the magic potion. *Get a fix* is a phrase common among star gazers and addicts. Either could have inspired that name. The village chief is called Vitalstatistix and the dog, Dogmatix. Geriatrix is the old man, and Cacofonix, the tone deaf bard who wants to break into a song at every victory and is forcibly gagged by the Gauls because of his raucous music. Archeopterix is the oldest living Gaul, so old he could be from the Dino age!

Most Roman names end with *us*. There is Felix Platypus, Crismus Bonus, Magnum Opus, Nefarious Purpus, etc. The riot of fun the creators would have had with the names is obvious. Then there are others like Esoteric, Prehistoric and Tartaric who escort their Goth Chief, Choleric.

A similar pattern can be observed in Tintin comics. Captain Haddock is a sailor and one of the main characters who love to drink, and *haddock* is also a type of fish. Calculus is an ingenious name for an absent-minded inventor.

## Favourite phrases

There are some characters who have a favourite phrase or word. Obelix keeps saying *These Romans are crazy*. It is a spoof of Julius Caesar's famous quote *These Gauls are crazy*. In Tintin comics, Captain Haddock's classic phrases are *thundering typhoons* and *blistering barnacles*. There are phrases in Roman and Latin that keep cropping up like *Veni, vidi, vici*; *Pax Romana*; *Ave Ceasar* and so on. It is our first brush with foreign languages.

Humour is deeply influenced by culture. People live lives and follow customs suited to their region. Hence, what's funny in Rome may not be funny in Egypt.

Asterix and Tintin comics can be clubbed for study in the classroom because they are similar in many ways. Both have French or Belgian origins and existed at the same time, each popular in its own way. So much so, they have been featured in the other comics as well. Asterix appears in *Tintin in Picaros* and Tintin appears in *Asterix in Belgium*. Their contemporariness is evident from the fact that anything that was popular at the time found mention and a place in the comic. That's why we have Laurel and Hardy making a guest appearance in one and Sean Connery as Bond in another. Drawing from real-life situations, many Hollywood stars have been caricatured in the comics to add meat to the plot.

## The Craze for Tintin

Tintin comics are loved by young and old. The older generation recollect the memories of their youth while the young love the adventures of the youthful reporter, Tintin; his friend, Captain Haddock; and his dog, Snowy. Few other standard characters like the absent-minded inventor, Calculus whose deafness is a source of comedy; Bianca Castafiore who entertains with her shrill operas; and the Thomsons, the detective duo who bring chaos wherever they go but entertain



with their word jumbles. As detectives the harder they try to disguise themselves, the more they stand out.

Tintin and Asterix have retained their spot as favourites among the readers. It is worth understanding how they can open up a whole new world of multicultural influence among children from a young age, thus making them tolerant towards differences that exist in various societies.

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## Lesson Plan

### *Using Comics in the Classroom*

*Sujata C*



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Using comics benefits students in many ways. The most important one being that they bring in humour into the classroom to enhance learning in the most stress free manner. It breaks barriers between the teacher and the taught and provides a great means to connect with each other. You can ask your students to read a few comics over a long weekend or during a short winter break and then discuss in the class. Language play is the speciality of Asterix and Tintin comics; their humour open up language learning opportunities. Puns, idioms and allusions are to be found in abundance in these comics which can be analysed and deconstructed for students to gain a good command over the language. So here's the list of specific benefits that can be acquired by reading Asterix and Tintin:

- Improves reading habit as the content is very entertaining.
- Develops language competency – vocabulary, expressions and idiomatic language.

- Develops higher order thinking skills.
- Enhances analytical thinking.
- Improves imagination.
- Heightens cultural awareness.
- Encourages original thinking.

### Activities to be conducted in class:

1. **Name game:** Ask students to study the names of the characters in both Asterix and Tintin and find the root word or phrase for each along with its meaning.
  - Let them think of names on similar lines for their friends and classmates based on this technique.
  - With these names a small script could be developed and performed as a humorous skit..



2. Analyse the naming technique used in Tintin comics.
3. **Map work:** Ask students to locate the places mentioned in Asterix on a map and then compare the ancient names with their present day counterparts.
4. Make students write character sketches of Asterix, Obelix and Vitalstatistix.
5. Engage students to write a note on the fighting style of Obelix.
6. **Describe the character of Tintin:**
  - how old is he roughly

- his looks
- his nature
- his ambitions
- his style and character

7. ***Onomatopoeia***: Ask students to write down all the noise and sound words used in the two comics. Most of the time the sound words are given when the heroes are bashing up the baddies. They can try to imagine the action accompanying the sound word used.

- During the course of this exercise students will discover that sound words change with language spoken. For instance when a donkey brays it is *hee haw* in the English but in Hindi it is generally *dhen choo*. Just for laughs students can mimic the sounds in all the languages they know and decide which sounds the best.

8. Make a list of the puns and idioms used. These can be categorised based on situations as there are plenty to be found.

9. Students can cite examples of the word play in Tintin.

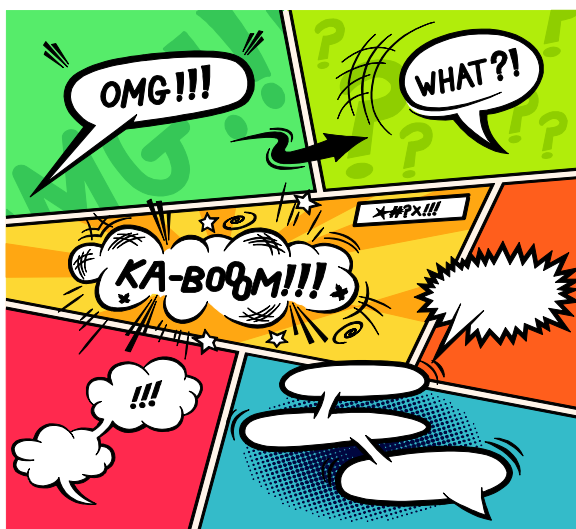
10. Conduct a quiz on Asterix and Tintin. Here are a few questions to get started. You can add to this list as well.

- Who were the artists who created Tintin?
- Who translated the Asterix and Tintin comics?
- Into how many languages is Asterix translated?
- What are the distinguishing features of Captain Haddock?
- What are the Captain's favourite expressions?
- Of which breed is Snowy, the dog?
- What does Snowy love to eat?
- How do most Asterix comics end?
- How does Obelix show he has defeated the Romans?
- What do the Gauls do to Cacophonix often?



- Name the favourite item at the banquet of the Gauls.

11. Use a panel of comics which has a dialogue in question answer form. Remove the answer from the second slide and ask the students to fill in their own replies in empty speech bubbles.



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12. Create a pocket cartoon based on a real life situation, whether political or social. Divide the class into groups for this exercise. Each group must have one person good at drawing and others for ideating and expressing. This will help them to work together to create something original.
13. Ask students to name humorous or comedy shows which they watch on television. Discuss what makes each one funny and the kind of humour that is used. Who is their favourite comedian?
14. Discuss the types of humour distinguishing between fine and cheap humour. Classify the content based on this. Students can discuss the difference between a clean joke and a sarcasm laden one.
15. **Uses of humour:** Humour comes in handy to discuss something embarrassing or difficult. Feel free to use it just for fun or to diffuse a tense situation or explain a sensitive topic without making anyone uncomfortable, like ones on sex education.
16. **Dramatics:** Have your class enact an episode from Asterix and Tintin comics.
17. Examine the humorous aspects of other popular comics read by students.
18. Have them watch Asterix and Tintin movies. Let them discuss the two experiences of reading the comic versus watching a movie.

19. **Cross cultural quiz:** Create a quiz (with *choose the best option* or *match the following* type questions) to improve the cultural understanding of students. This can be done at two levels of context – national and international.

For example: If you are in Punjab, express your appreciation by using these expressions.

- a. *Balle balle*
- b. *Romba nalla*
- c. *Kya baat hai*

20. **Find the punch line:** Every joke has a punch line. Allow students to identify and analyse them. This exercise will enhance their ability to get a better understanding of humour and also develop a sense for it.

***Sujata C** is a writer and editor with a portfolio of diversified writing categories like web content, articles, short stories for children, technical editing, etc. She has been a brand consultant and advisor for several companies and has worked with concerns like McCann Erickson, New Delhi; Foundations Advertising Services, New Delhi; Saatchi and Saatchi, Hyderabad; etc.*



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### **Droll (adjective, noun)**

**Pronunciation:** /drəʊl/

**Meaning:** Curious or unusual in a way that provokes dry amusement. A jester or entertainer; a buffoon (archaic).

**Origin and additional information:** Early 17th century as an adjective from French *drôle*. Drawing from its archaic meaning, the word is also used to denote a type of short comical sketch that became popular in England in the Puritan Interregnum (the period between the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the arrival of Charles II in 1660 which marked the beginning of the Restoration period in England).

**Words section:** The Interregnum was a Puritan period where an austere lifestyle that restricted any form of excess was advocated. This resulted in the closure of theatres, curb on the practise of music, arts, or even gambling. Left without any means of practising their art, actors began borrowing famous scenes from various Elizabethan dramas to which they added material from droll for the sake of humour or wit, and performed illegally to make some money. Without a stage, or costumes and props, theatre was kept alive by stitching together scenes from Shakespeare's plays and medieval interludes, mixing violence and bawdy humour. Thus a strange and dangerous new type of illegal

theatre developed – *Droll* – the only permitted form of dramatic entertainment in Cromwell’s England.

The most famous one is a collection of twenty-seven drolls written by Francis Kirkman called *The Wits, or Sport Upon Sport*. It adapted three famous scenes from Shakespeare’s plays including *Bottom the Weaver* from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the gravedigger scene from *Hamlet*, and a collection of scenes on Falstaff called *The Bouncing Knight*.

Drolls challenged safe, elitist, intellectual notions of the Elizabethan stage, introducing pantomime, carnival, and loud shouting. Drolls were sketch comedies for the working man as they were informally performed in pubs and back alleys.

### Usage:

- i.      Whereat they said how **droll**, how cheerful, what a flow of spirits!  
            ~ *Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* by Charles Dickens
- ii.     It may seem a **droll** idea; but see what progress has been made  
            already.  
  ~ *The Three Cities Trilogy* by Emile Zola
- iii.    If you’re looking for a nice enough, quirky and **droll** adventure film  
            that you won’t remember on Monday, then here’s your movie.  
  (Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/droll>)