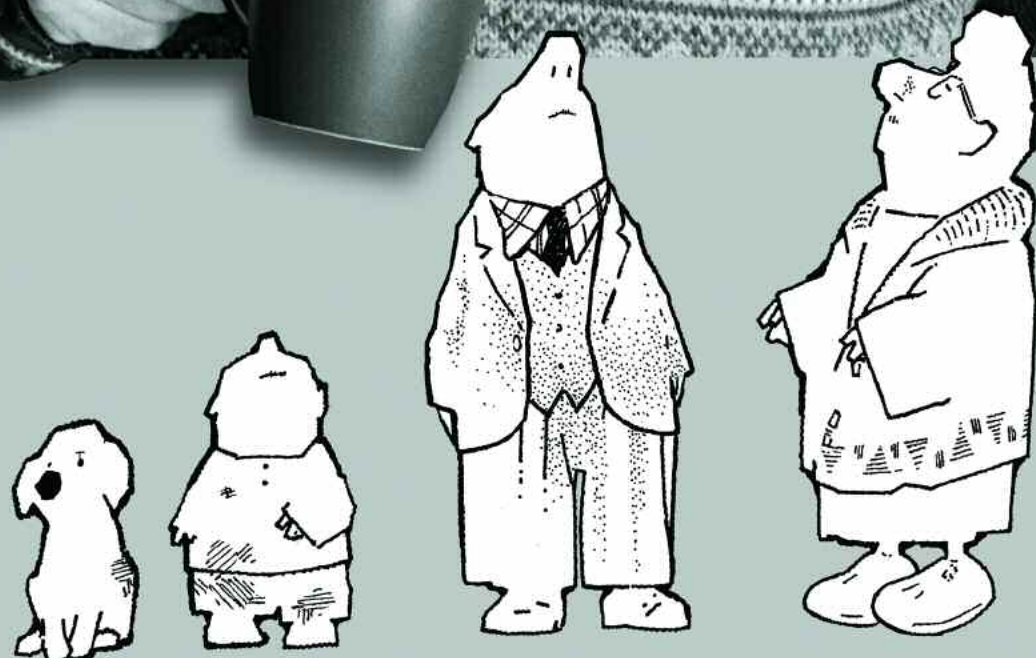




# The Inscrutable Mr.

His characters are so weird. But somehow so normal.  
Is it any surprise cartoonist **Richard Guindon**  
draws inspiration from Northern Michiganders like you?

TEXT BY **PATTY LANOUE STEARNS** PORTRAITS BY **TODD ZAWISTOWSKI**





# He

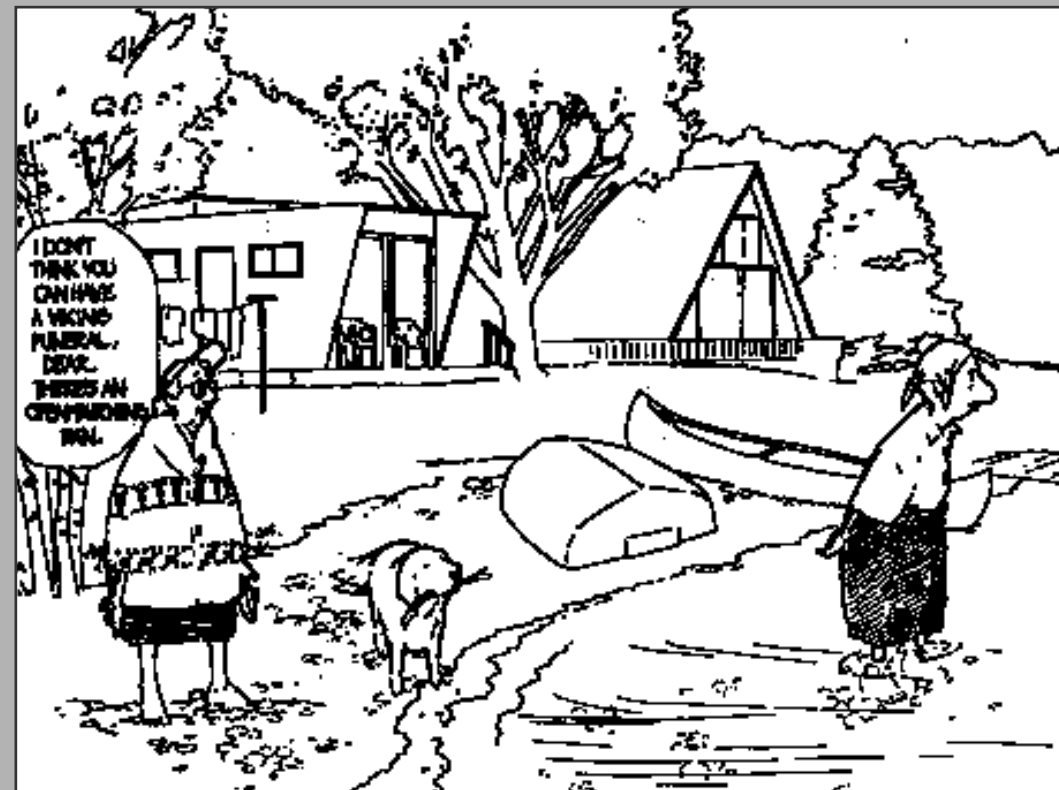
has been called an angry man, a bon vivant, an irreverent wit, an irrepressible cynic, a guy who's a little too preoccupied with carp. Richard Guindon is all that. And on this particular December afternoon, the legendary, sometimes reclusive cartoonist is also a convivial host, delivering deadpan one-liners while whipping up a mozzarella and red pepper frittata in his Suttons Bay kitchen.

Dressed in his standard Up North khaki uniform—safari shirt and slacks—Guindon flies back and forth across the room, grabbing pans and knives and cutting boards, chopping mushrooms, red peppers and pea pods, cracking eggs like a pro. (He in fact once owned a coffeehouse.) The open, stainless-steel shelving around his high-tech, slat-walled kitchen looks like a gourmet shop and boasts a sparkling, vast and ever-expanding collection of espresso pots—some French, some Italian, some new, some vintage.

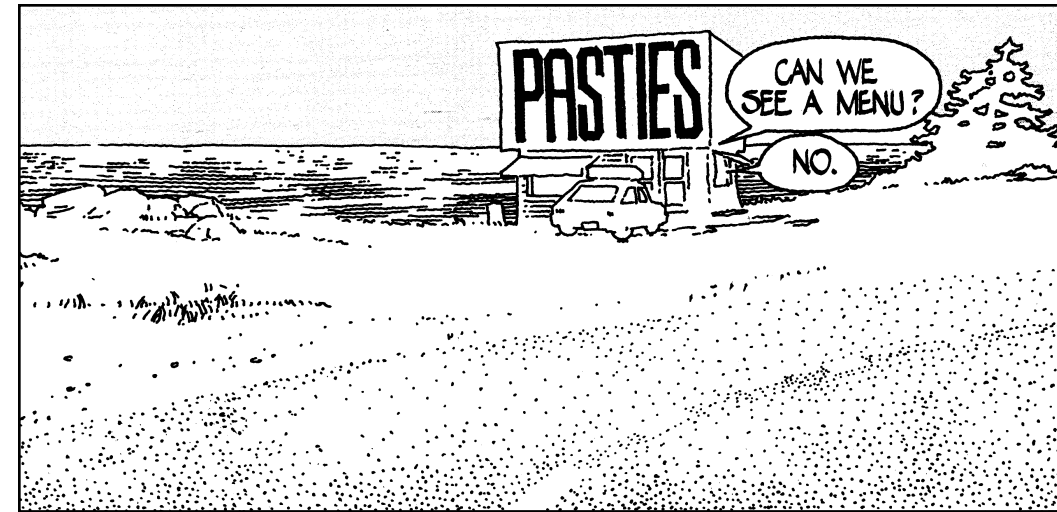
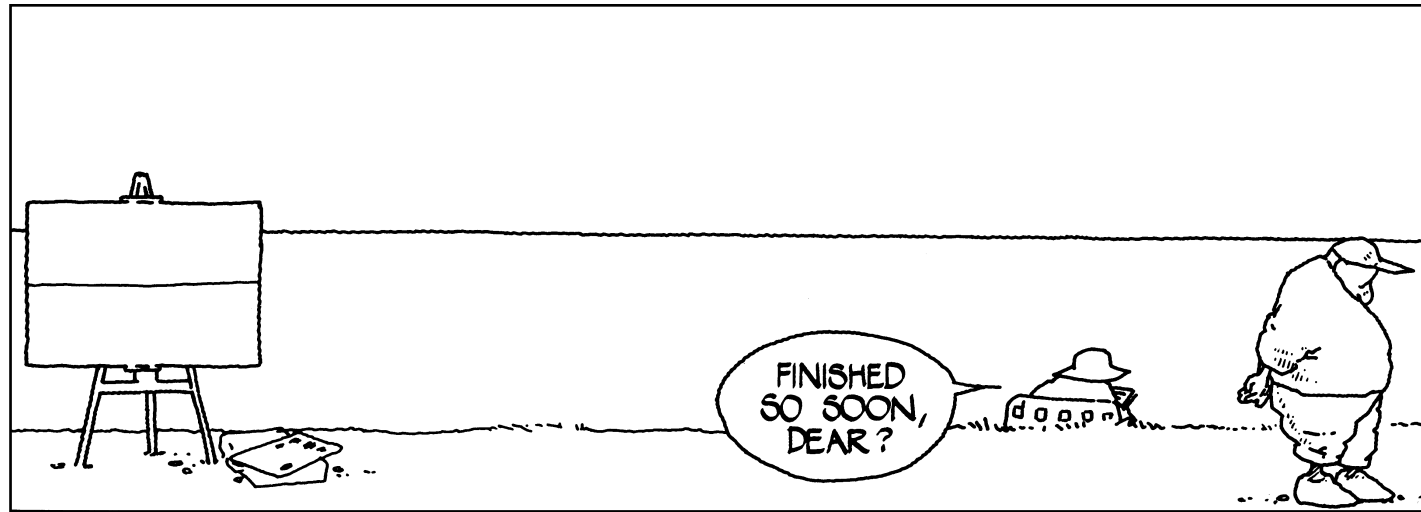
Gaze over to the floor-to-ceiling bookcases in Guindon's living/dining room and scan the titles: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Marcella's Italian Kitchen*, *Salt: A World History*, *The Lies of George W. Bush*. There's an entire section devoted to the works of novelist Elmore "Dutch" Leonard, whose late wife, Carol, brought back one of Guindon's prized espresso pots from a trip to Europe. A case of the cartoonist's favorite wine, *Côtes du Rhône*, fills another couple of shelves. Next to that stands a three-quarter-sized rendition of the artist himself—a painted board with a cutout for a wristwatch, which is missing. Guindon calls it his "Grandfather Clock," although he is not yet a grandfather.

At age 69, Dick Guindon is still the reigning off-the-wall cartoonist for the *Detroit Free Press*, still edgy after the 40-some years he's put into this particular career, which began in the early 1960's in New York when he worked as an underground cartoonist for *The Realist* and regular contributor to *The Nation*, *Downbeat*, *Esquire* and *Playboy*. That led to syndication at the *Minneapolis Tribune* and later brought him to Detroit in the early 1980's. During that time he married and divorced twice; fathered a son, Grey, now 34; and lived all over the world.

On and off for the last two decades, Guindon has made Northern



CARTOONS ©RICHARD GUINDON



"This is the farthest I've ever been from Detroit."

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**but after 40-plus years of writing material, that's the way your mind works."**

Michigan his home. He has settled into an airy, Asian-inspired house that he gutted two years ago and is slowly putting back together.

Guindon has produced cartoons that are part of the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art and The Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library. He has authored six books, and collectors sell pieces of his life from galleries and over the Internet for big bucks.

None of this has gone to his head.

When he's not working on his four-times-a-week strip for the *Free Press*, you might find this impish fellow hanging around the organic produce section at Hansen's Market in Suttons Bay. But watch it: You might become his next subject. Especially if you're doing anything remotely weird, like juggling seedless grapes.

Oh, and if you don't understand his humor sometimes, you are not alone. "I'm always happy to find that people don't get all the jokes," he laughs, "because for years I thought it was just me."

And why is Northern Michigan the perfect spot for a guy like Guindon? For one, it's a place where a person can live and let live. And what's more, according to Guindon, "there's nothing crazier than a bunch of Americans living at the end of a land mass."

**R**ichard Guindon might be working in Hollywood rather than Northern Michigan had things gone a different way. His oldest friend, Irv Letofsky, retired entertainment editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, has known him from the early days in St. Paul, Minnesota, when Guindon owned The Jazz Lab, "a sort of surreptitious coffeehouse on Payne Avenue, which was raided by suspicious St. Paul police one night during a Great Books discussion," according to a column Letofsky wrote in 1962 for the *Minneapolis Tribune*.

Not long after, Letofsky came up with the idea of the two

of them doing a comedy show. Letofsky started the still-running Brave New Workshop in Minneapolis, dishing up humor inspired by cutting-edge satirists Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl. Guindon and Letofsky wrote most of the material for the early shows.

"He has a cosmic view of life. Dick was great to work with because he would come up with the central idea—a great idea." And often, the ending, says Letofsky.

They also wrote a TV series that was twice optioned but never produced in the late-1970's, a Western spoof called "We've Gotta Get Outta Here," about a Jewish family in Nebraska.

But even though Guindon had friends who did well as comedy writers, he knew it wasn't right for him. "I don't have that sort of aggressiveness that allows you to fight a lot for your work," Guindon says. "You better not be too thin-skinned."

Letofsky also says Guindon tried his hand at acting. "He was a nervous wreck."

Guindon chose New York instead and ended up traveling throughout the Middle East as a correspondent for *The Realist* until the Israeli six-day war broke out in 1967. Afterward, he returned to Minneapolis, this time at the *Tribune* as a cartoonist, and then began the grueling yet much-celebrated work of a syndicated cartoonist. The rest, as they say, is history.

Letofsky says Guindon is impulsive. Like when he got the notion that he wanted to lose some weight, so he bought a 10-speed bike. "About 10 days later he was saying, 'Irv, is there anybody you know that might want to buy a 10-speed bike?'"

**S**uttons Bay boat builder David Dean remembers when he first met Guindon. The cartoonist lived in a rented condo in the village of Suttons Bay at the time and was driving a snappy, new, silver DeLorean sports car around town.

"It was the year they came out. He just had to have one," Dean recalls. "He is very style-conscious, in a good way."

He also says Guindon is the funniest person he knows, dry and perceptive, gifted as well as quirky: "Very unto himself. I like to give Richard lots of room. He keeps an odd schedule—he's on a 26-hour clock."

Guindon likes to commune at lunchtime with the woodworkers at Dean's boatbuilding shop. "He has a lot easier time relating to ordinary people," Dean explains.

Guindon has never socialized much with his fellow cartoonists. "I find them a little bit sad, frankly," he says. "They tend to work on kitchen tables and not think of themselves very professionally and that sort of thing." He gets a smirk on his face.

You never really know when he's kidding.

"After all these years, I find it very hard to give anybody a straight answer," Guindon admits. "And it isn't that I'm a smart-ass, but after 40-plus years of writing material, that's the way your mind works. Where somebody asks at a checkout, 'Can I have your zip code?' I will say, 'Sure, but what am I going to do when I want to get mail?' It's not to put them down, it's what occurs to me."

He is constantly mining for material, humor that has a certain shelf life, because he has to work so far ahead. Not a joke off the event, not the secondary joke, but the tertiary joke. A tough way to make a living.

"You get calls from people asking to explain the joke, which I find absolutely flabbergasting, simply because that's the easy part of the paper—what do they do when they get to the editorials?" he says.

"Nobody gets all of them. That isn't really something I take any pride in at all. You're trying to communicate. What happens is you're stuck with your own sense of humor. I wonder if it's a little too subtle."

Guindon keeps tape recorders all over the house for ideas. He does massive amounts of research for his drawings, going out with a digital camera to get a shot of, say, a shopping cart. Or maybe a carp. Or an ice fisherman.

"Everyone who's ever been around me is always surprised by how much goes into it, because you always think, well, they're just potato heads," Guindon says.

But screenwriter Kurt Luedtke, a friend and former executive editor of the *Free Press*, has seen this artist in action. "The truth about Guindon is that he draws unusually well; a lot of folks miss that, I think, perceiving him as a very funny guy with an offbeat sense of humor who's a cartoonist. Study those panels for a while and you realize that his oblique take on life is just the beginning of a process that really ends with a masterful pen."

**G**uindon is getting ready to draw. Like most creative people, he puts it off until the last minute. In fact, he does not want to draw in front of this reporter. He still has some thinking to do. More research. He'd rather talk about Northern Michigan, or people, or the trees that were cut from his property to let in more light, or the fact that his cartoons are going to full color sometime next year and are being moved to the comics page.

Which is ironic, because Guindon, for all of his technical or hypercreativity, is far happier in shades of gray, as his strip has always run.

"I love gray—so many shades. I named my son Grey. Color is very hard to live with." Indeed, look around his house and his office, and it's all shades of gray—soothing, simple, elegant, a little mysterious. Just like Guindon. ■

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