

Sat June 16, 2007

Happy Father's Day, jerk

By Kathleen Parker
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A week before Father's Day, cartoonist Berkeley Breathed did a very cartoonist thing and caused a controversy to be stirred over a comic strip that seemed to slight fathers while celebrating lesbian moms.

More or less. Reaction has been swift and predictable: outrage on the right; smug contempt for the right on the left. In the middle is one happy cartoonist, who got a rise from a jaded nation. Though the message of the strip may be interpreted more than one way — either as advancing an idea or exposing a cultural phenomenon — outrage is not necessarily misplaced.

For those who missed it, the strip — "Opus" — shows two boys talking about third-grader Davie Dinkle having two moms. "Multiple mommies," says one boy. "Cool," says the other. "No dad?" asks Opus Penguin, the existential penguin and namesake of the strip.

In the following frames, the boys wonder how Davie Dinkle will do without a male role model in the house. Whereupon, *CRASH!* — a television set showing a baseball batter on the screen is hurled through a window.

The clever fellow behind this gesture of apparent dissatisfaction is the usual suspect: a beer-slurpin', cigarette-smokin' white guy wearing a three-day beard and a cap festooned with what appears to be a set of mammaries in a bikini top.

"Now THAT was a pitch, you @\$!* moron!!" shouts the male role model.

Well, there you go. The gag is a tad threadbare, but cartoonists would be out of business without stereotypes and cliches. We get the point. Maybe. Some see the strip as anti-dad and pro-lesbian; others, including lesbian bloggers, see it as making the point that gender doesn't necessarily predict good or bad parenting. Others might see it as simple recognition that the times, they are a-changin'.

All of which is to say, the comic strip is effective.

It also contains multiple layers of truth. The first truth is that same-sex couples today are raising children, among them one of the grandchildren of the vice president of the United States.

Another truth is that kids are having conversations like the one in the strip. A child who has two mommies (or two daddies) will get noticed and talked about. It is entirely possible that two little boys who love their mothers might think that having two mothers would be twice as good. Sort of like having two candy bars instead of just one. Here's another truth: Children don't know much.

But here's the biggest truth of all: Men and fathers have been on the receiving end of a male-bashing trend for the past 20 years or so, and they've had enough.

Breathed's comic strip might have faded into the ethers if it didn't cut so close to the bone, if it weren't one more insult added to a history that long ago ceased to amuse.

On television, men are depicted as boors or buffoons, while in the broader culture, they're deadbeats or wife beaters. In a 1999 study of how fathers were presented in 102 prime-time shows, the National Fatherhood Initiative found only four in which a father was portrayed as present and involved in his children's lives.

At the same time little boys and girls are seeing bad, dumb daddies on TV, more than a third don't live with their own father, owing either to divorce or single motherhood. Despite inevitable exceptions to the rule, it is merely ignorant to say that a father's absence has no effect on children. Study after study shows an association between fatherlessness and a wide range of social pathologies, including drug abuse, promiscuity and delinquency.

Two mommies may work out fine for some children. And some men, just like some women, are contemptible slobs or worse. But neither observation diminishes the larger truth that children need fathers, most of whom are not, in fact, the cartoonish characters we love to loathe.

Breathed's comic strip, intended or not, revealed where we have arrived as a society in our attitudes toward male role models, otherwise known as fathers: Two lesbian mommies are cool, while dad is a violent, profane, impulsive, substance-abusing slob. In such a world, we can be grateful for an existential penguin whose voice offers a counterweight to the know-nothingness of children.

Opus Penguin asked the appropriate question: "No dad?"