

Getting down to monkey business

Cartoonist Frank Cho talks about the future of comics, his newspaper frustrations and—of course—his undying love for monkeys

TYSON DURST
Arts & Entertainment Writer

Frank “Monkey Boy” Cho has a soft spot for primates. The self-taught artist and writer has been drawing monkeys—along with all other kinds of animals—in his popular comic strip *Liberty Meadows* for years, and has garnered numerous awards for his efforts.

But while comic books are experiencing newfound growth and exposure, the newspaper comic strip isn’t so fortunate these days.

“They’re dying a slow death,” Cho says. “People aren’t reading newspapers in the same numbers that they used to. They’re turning to other sources for news like the Internet.”

Liberty Meadows got its start as a syndicated comic strip in mainstream newspapers. After a few years, Cho decided to take his strip into the comic-book market exclusively, currently publishing at Image Comics. One of the reasons for that move was due to frustration in dealing with editorial attitudes and interference at various newspapers. A long list of strips that were censored in some form can be found at Cho’s website, www.libertymeadows.com.

“[Newspaper editors] tend to be snobs that treat comics as juvenile fare where you’re being told to dumb something down so a five-year old can understand it,” Cho explains. “They have to realize that comics should be treated just like any other material that they put in their papers. It’s kind of odd because comics used to boost circulation and were featured more prominently.”

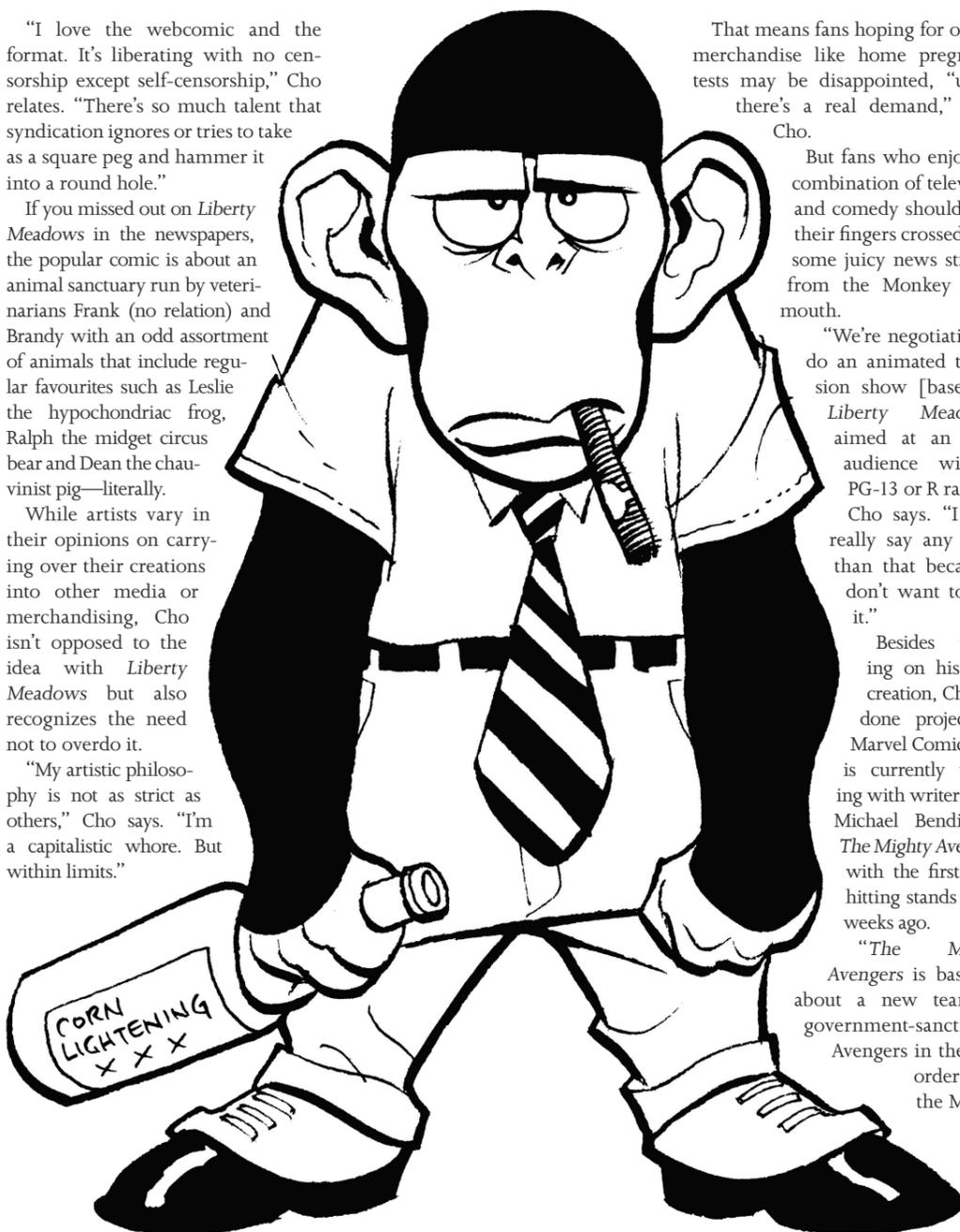
Cho is more enthusiastic about comic strips finding new life in digital form online, more commonly known as webcomics.

“I love the webcomic and the format. It’s liberating with no censorship except self-censorship,” Cho relates. “There’s so much talent that syndication ignores or tries to take as a square peg and hammer it into a round hole.”

If you missed out on *Liberty Meadows* in the newspapers, the popular comic is about an animal sanctuary run by veterinarians Frank (no relation) and Brandy with an odd assortment of animals that include regular favourites such as Leslie the hypochondriac frog, Ralph the midget circus bear and Dean the chauvinist pig—literally.

While artists vary in their opinions on carrying over their creations into other media or merchandising, Cho isn’t opposed to the idea with *Liberty Meadows* but also recognizes the need not to overdo it.

“My artistic philosophy is not as strict as others,” Cho says. “I’m a capitalistic whore. But within limits.”



That means fans hoping for official merchandise like home pregnancy tests may be disappointed, “unless there’s a real demand,” jokes Cho.

But fans who enjoy the combination of television and comedy should keep their fingers crossed with some juicy news straight from the Monkey Boy’s mouth.

“We’re negotiating to do an animated television show [based on *Liberty Meadows*] aimed at an adult audience with a PG-13 or R rating,” Cho says. “I can’t really say any more than that because I don’t want to jinx it.”

Besides working on his own creation, Cho has done projects at Marvel Comics and is currently working with writer Brian Michael Bendis on *The Mighty Avengers* with the first issue hitting stands a few weeks ago.

“*The Mighty Avengers* is basically about a new team of government-sanctioned Avengers in the new order of the Marvel

Universe after the events of *Civil War*,” Cho explains.

The recently concluded *Civil War* storyline attracted attention in the mainstream press with high-profile events that included the surprising and controversial death of a major superhero icon.

“I expected the increased attention in the mainstream press because of the way Hollywood is gobbling up all of the properties,” Cho says. “Some of the harsher, more visceral reactions to the *Civil War* story and things like the death of Captain America were a bit surprising though.”

As for *Liberty Meadows*, it wouldn’t be complete in any format without the Monkey Boy, a rendition of himself in monkey form that Cho uses to sometimes break the fourth wall in his strips. Cult film aficionados may also recognize it as a reference to the 1984 film, *The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai Across the 8th Dimension* starring Peter “Robocop” Weller. As for the fascination with monkeys and other primates, Cho cites several reasons.

“I don’t know what it is,” Cho ponders. “I think there’s an innate philosophy that all people have that monkeys equal comedy, something I discovered early on. They’re like caricatures of human beings and they’re fun to look at. And they fling their own poop.”

But when faced with choosing between his children or having an army of primates at his command, the father of two has his priorities in order.

“As a loving pragmatist, I’d have to go with my children,” Cho gushes. “At least until they hit puberty. When they reach their teen years and start rebelling, I might look into monkeys. Robot monkeys.”