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From the left: Stephanie Bass, Brenda Summers and Joyce Fitzpatrick

Photo by Susannah Odenwelder

Three generations of JAFa presidents

Immediate past president Stephanie Bass, president pro-tem Brenda Summers and current president Joyce Fitzpatrick meet at the Kenan Center in Chapel Hill for the October board meeting. They also attended the kick-off reception for the Triangle chapter's mentor program. Please see page 8 for Fitzpatrick profile.

Doug Marlette: Forcing society to face itself

By John Bare

Picture a smiling Supreme Court justice perched above the courtroom floor like royalty, his hands folded neatly as he leans forward in a high-backed throne of a chair. To the justice's right is a prison cell for white convicts that contains a metal cot and a trash can. At his left is another cell — this one a windowless dungeon set aside for "colored" convicts and furnished only with a gruesome electric chair.

If such an image is a bit unsettling, it is especially disturbing to have that scene thrust before your eyes in the form of an editorial cartoon, with its unrelenting black-and-white lines granting the American judicial system not a smidgen of saving grace. But Doug Marlette certainly intended to disturb and unsettle readers when he published the cartoon in 1987 in *The Atlanta Constitution*. Editorial cartoons, as he sees it, should "challenge authority and question power."

The cartoon helped Marlette, the featured speaker at the Reed Sarratt Distinguished Lecture in Chapel Hill on Sept. 25, 1991, win a Pulitzer Prize, and it illustrates his willingness to break through the walls that protect the nation's most prominent people and institutions. Marlette has targeted everyone and everything from Ronald Reagan to Congress to *The New York Times*. Angry readers, furious at Marlette for "rustling sacred cattle," have denounced him as "a tool of Satan."

Still, many find his art work hilarious. Laughter rolled through the crowd in Chapel Hill as Marlette showed slides of his cartoons and his comic strip. "I see no evidence of hungry children in America," Ed Meese bellows in one cartoon, his own over-stuffed belly blocking his view of a frail, starving child.

The punch lines are socially significant as well as humorous. "Regular or unleaded?" an Alaskan seafood vendor asks a customer in the days after the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

Yet what sets Marlette apart from others who fashion editorial cartoons is that he forces us to confront society's potholes — from racism to greed to government decay to big shots who have outgrown their britches. We all see these problems, but we move past them as effortlessly as we drive by potholes on the highway, figuring someone else eventually will repair things. But Marlette's cartoons do not let us escape the conflicts that bubble beneath the surface of everyday events. Peeling away confounding peripheral issues, Marlette reduces complex problems to raw, evocative images that cannot be avoided.

"I like turning symbols upside down and inside out and playing with images so that they are not so predictable," Marlette said in a 1988 book that contains examples of his Pulitzer Prize-winning work. "I enjoy taking familiar symbols and clichés that have

been trivialized and denuded of meaning and retooling their content and restoring their meaning by looking at them with new eyes."

His best cartoons need no captions or punch lines, and audiences react instantly. In one of the more popular slides Marlette presented in Chapel Hill, a sheep was lying at the base of a tree trying to fall asleep. A bubble above its head showed that the animal was counting Dukakises — the same way insomniacs count sheep to bore themselves into a slumber. In a single cartoon

Marlette had already finished a whimsical cartoon on the first teacher in space when he heard the shuttle Challenger had exploded. He responded with this drawing.



Reprinted courtesy of Doug Marlette

frame, Marlette said more about the Dukakis charisma deficit than any pundit could have said with words.

A 1986 *Charlotte Observer* cartoon of a tearful eagle mourning the loss of the Challenger astronauts immediately affected readers. Swamped with requests, the newspaper handed out more than 1,500 copies of the cartoon the day after it appeared. Since then, nearly 70,000 copies have been distributed.

Marlette often makes people mad, especially long-time adversary U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms. One Marlette cartoon shows the senator dropping his trousers and mooning the Capitol. The caption reads: "Carolina Moon Keeps Shining." The cartoon, which ran in *The Charlotte Observer*, sparked hearty laughter at the Chapel Hill lecture. Helms, however, was furious at *The Observer* and stopped talking to the paper's Washington correspondent, Marlette said.

After the Bakkers lost control of their PTL theme park ministry, a Marlette cartoon portrayed Falwell as half-man, half-serpent, praying into a TV camera: "That's right — Jim and Tammy were expelled from paradise and left me in charge." Marlette said his editors reluctantly published the cartoon, and Falwell subsequently demanded and received an apology from the paper.

As an editorial cartoonist in Charlotte, Marlette said, he "was making fun of Jim and Tammy before it was cool." And whenever the Bakkers were particularly upset by a Marlette cartoon, Jim would display the offensive material on his PTL show and beseech his followers to condemn Marlette and *The Observer*. "I heard from crazy people from all the continents," Marlette said.

That his cartoons sometimes cause outrage is no accident. "Cartoons are a vehicle of attack, so the best ones possess a certain fury," Marlette said in the 1988 book.

His best cartoons also teach us about ourselves, about our own philosophical makeup. We learn something when we are presented with a portrait of a bearded Jesus in a traditional pose — except that he is rolling his eyes in frustration and despair. Or when we see an old black man holding his grandson on his knee and saying: "President? No, child, but you can grow up to be front-runner." How do we react? Do we laugh? Do we wince? Do we avoid the subject at the family dinner table? Do we say, "He went too far with this one."?

Both his cartoons and his comic strip "Kudzu" are grounded in the lessons he learned growing up in small towns in North Carolina, Mississippi and Florida. The strip is set in the fictitious Southern town of Bypass, and the lead character is Kudzu, a gangly high school kid who can't get a date with the girl he adores. Kudzu also can't find the right wrench for his Uncle Dub, a good ol' boy



Photo by Grant Halverson

Marlette explains his cartoons at the Reed Sarratt lecture in September.

Marlette describes as "a recovering Democrat." Religion is a primary element of the strip, and TV evangelist Will B. Dunn is even considering a run for the presidency.

"The cartoons come straight out of my Sunday School classes and my civics classes," Marlette said, noting the time he spent studying the Constitution and the Ten Commandments. "I never got over that."

Marlette, now a cartoonist for *New York Newsday*, has worked for the *St. Petersburg Times*, *The Charlotte Observer* and *The Atlanta Constitution*, giving his career a Southern bent that befits the Sarratt lecture series. The lecture is an endowed tribute to Reed Sarratt, a 1937 alumnus of the School who was a long-time director of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation in Atlanta.

Marlette and his family own a home in Hillsborough, a Tar Heel town not too different from his comic strip village of Bypass. "New York is abrasive," he said, so he lives part-time 600 miles away, freed by technology to fax cartoons to New York. Marlette, who attended Florida State University, has recently released a new book, *In Your Face: A Cartoonist At Work* (Houghton Mifflin). □

John Bare is a master's student in the news-editorial sequence from Garner, N.C.