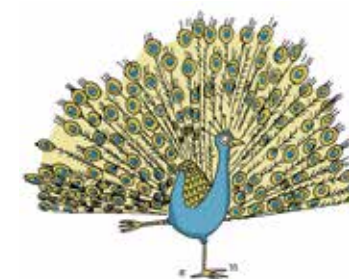




# THE COLOR OF FUNNY

MARIA SCRIVAN TOOK A CAREER PATH  
LESS TRAVELED AND THE RESULTS ARE PRETTY CUTE



by STEPHEN SAWICKI  
portrait photograph by WILLIAM TAUFIC



Not long ago, Maria Scrivan was in New York's Central Park, volunteering for an organization known as the Ink Well Foundation, which deploys cartoonists, animators and other such artists to share their passion for drawing with ailing children, when she noticed one boy who had his own concept about making art. "There was this cute little kid who was drawing with one marker," she remembers. "Then he started drawing with two. And then it occurred to him that he could take a fistful of markers and draw with the entire fistful. It was just so much fun to see. At that point, nobody had told him, 'Oh, no, you have to do it this way, you can't do it that way.'"

Talk to Maria for a while and it's easy to understand why the Greenwich-raised cartoonist took a liking to the youngster: They were kindred spirits. Although she generally uses but one marker at a time, Maria too knows the joy of working without a rule book. "I love coming up with the characters and the expressions and the silly things they do, because it's limitless," she says. "There are no rules. Any character can do anything. A giraffe can drive a car with its head out of the sunroof and it's perfectly fine. I have a lot of fun with that."

These days Maria is having more fun than ever as her career as a cartoonist is beginning to blossom. In



September, her daily panel cartoon, *Half Full*, which offers her twist on the perplexities of everyday life, debuted on one of the Internet's top comics websites, [gocomics.com](http://gocomics.com). A few months earlier, she did a weeklong stint as substitute cartoonist for the syndicated strip *Rhymes with Orange*, her work gracing newspaper funny pages nationwide. She's also had two recent pieces in *MAD Magazine*. Not bad for someone who was already busy contributing cartoons to the social media news blog [mashable.com](http://mashable.com) and magazines like *Parade*, in addition to doing greeting cards, a line of checks and even T-shirts. Maria also has a self-published children's book, *Dogi the Yogi*, about a dog who does yoga, among other projects in various stages of development, with new possibilities always springing up.

"It's all kind of a parallel experience," the Stamford resident says. "I have so many ideas that I just move from one to the next to the next. Whatever deadline is next is the project that gets priority."

Maria's cartoon universe is populated with peculiar inhabitants, both people and creatures, who tend to turn everyday happenstance upside down. Two snails, for example, are on the move in one of her panels, with the youngster pestering the adult with the timeless question,

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"Are we there yet?" In another, a little girl building an elaborate sand castle at the beach, quotes the mantra of real estate agents everywhere: "Location, location, location." Two dogs, meanwhile, are depicted sitting upright and cross-legged on mats, with candles and incense burning nearby. "The key to meditation," says one of them, "is learning to stay."

**"We lost something in simplicity, but we gained so much in just the ability to get our work out there and the reach we have. I find it kind of funny that people in Istanbul are retweeting my comics."** —MARIA ON TECHNOLOGY

In years past, the ultimate goal for a cartoonist was to sign on with a major syndicate, which distributed one's work to newspapers all over the country, and in many cases provided a comfortable living for life. But with the struggles that the print media face today, such gigs are increasingly rare. Newspapers have cut back on their

comics. Magazines, too, use fewer cartoons than ever. Increasingly, cartoonists must take a shotgun approach to their business and sell their work to an array of outlets. "The doom and gloom people say this is a dead-end profession," says Brian Walker, president of the Connecticut chapter of the National Cartoonists Society and son of *Beetle Bailey's* Mort Walker. "But cartoonists are clever and they're adaptable. Maria is a good example of somebody who is going back and forth between different markets and different mediums and making a career for herself."

Selling one's wares is no small trick, especially since a cartoonist must pump so much time and energy into the work itself. But as anyone who knows Maria will attest, she has energy to spare. "She gets up early in the morning and exercises, then starts getting to work," says her husband Andrew, a Riverside native and sailing coach. "For her that means creating huge lists and just cranking through them." »



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Maria with Sam Viviano, *MAD Magazine* art director and famed cartoonist Sandra Boynton



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## A World of Inspiration

Typically, Maria keeps nine-to-five hours, working out of her home studio or occasionally going to a coffee shop or the library for a change of scenery. (She and Andrew have two cats, Milo and Doski, the latter of which she calls “my editor and assistant.”) But even when she’s off the clock, she’s always stumbling upon ideas that she can use in her work, be it the annoyances of daily life or people who might make good characters for her cartoons—the grocery clerk, a police officer or whomever.

“I’m kind of working—and I put air quotes around the word *working*—all the time because I’m constantly observing,” she says. “A lot of cartoons come from frustrating situations in life, the DMV or a trip to the post office with a big line or something. I’ve always been that way. I’m just very into noticing details and little moments. I think that’s why I love Instagram [the mobile photo-sharing application] so much because I always have my phone and my camera with me and I can capture all these little moments, whether I’m out on a bike ride or a run or just wandering through life.”

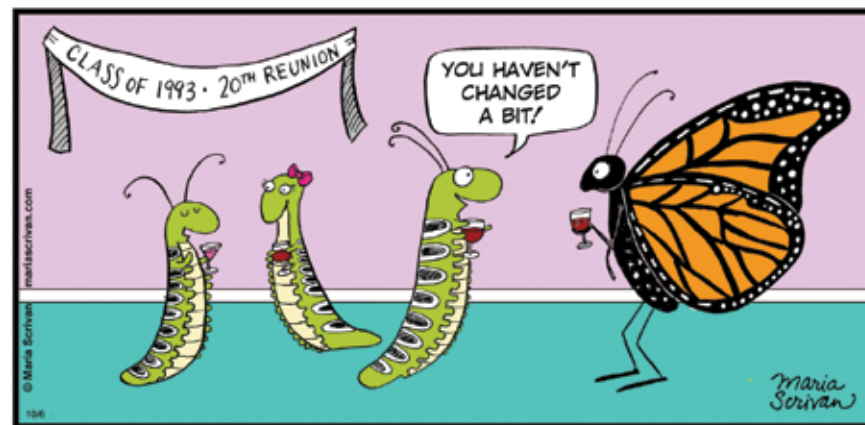
She likes to tell about the time she got a great deal on an airline ticket, paying only \$100. “But then they charged me for every little thing to the point that the ticket was

nearly \$100 more,” she says. “At the time it was frustrating, but I’ve gotten several cartoons now out of that experience, so I guess it kind of worked out.”

Maria is also a skilled photographer and water colorist. So even if an affecting moment fails to make it into her cartoon, Maria is likely to find another way to re-create it. “With Maria you live life twice,” says Julie Lapin, who lives in Glenville and has been friends with Maria since kindergarten at Cos Cob School. “Everything is captured in some sort of creative way with her.”

Maria is also devoted to exercise. She tries to work out every day, be it running, bicycling or hitting the weights. (It was at the gym, in fact, where she met her husband.) Among other accomplishments, she’s completed two IronMan triathlons and a marathon, and she’s pedaled up Mount Washington in New Hampshire, the highest mountain in the Northeast. She’s also cycled from Montreal to Maine and Los Angeles to San Francisco to raise money to fight AIDS.

Besides the health benefits, vigorous activity serves her at the drawing table as well. She speaks of a poetry teacher she had during a semester abroad in college, when she studied at the Lacoste School of the Arts in France, who taught her how to break through creative slumps. “He always talked about motion,” Maria says. “If you were ever stuck, he said you should go for a walk or get in a car or get on a train, just to be in motion. And I realized that that’s a big part of my creative process.”



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## Of Cats & Cartoons

As a youngster growing up in Cos Cob, and later Riverside, she was enthralled with cartoons, particularly the churlish cat Garfield created by Jim Davis. “The main reason I wanted to be a cartoonist was Garfield,” she says. “I had every Garfield book there was. I studied them and loved them and all I wanted to do was to be a cartoonist.” Another influence was Sandra Boynton, of greeting card and children’s book fame.

After graduating from Greenwich High School, Maria studied fine arts at Clark University. She worked at an animation studio in Stamford for a while, then for an interactive advertising agency before finally starting a graphic-design business of her own, counting IBM, AT & T and EMCOR among her clients.

Through it all, cartooning was never far from her mind. Early on, she took an adult education class in cartooning that Brain Walker taught at Fairfield University. And though her graphic-design business was doing well, it soon became evident that cartooning was how she really wanted to spend her time. “I realized, ‘Wait a minute, this is what I’m supposed to be doing,’” she says. “I had this feeling that I can’t waste any more time doing other things, I need to do this. And once I committed to it, one thing after the next happened. It seemed like all the doors flew open and everything just seemed to fall into place.”

Some cartoonists mourn the decline of print, but Maria’s comfortable with the rise of technology. When she’s out and about and hits upon an idea, she’ll dictate a reminder to herself on her iPhone. She also has an iPad, which she’s constantly using to summon up reference images—such as that of a Tibetan monk, or countless other subjects—that she might be depicting in her cartoons. And

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though she usually draws with pen and ink, she'll typically scan her work onto her computer and use a Cintiq tablet to clean up the lines and add coloring. "I still am a purist and still really like the feeling of an ink pen," she says. "I also like having originals, so I'm reluctant to use the Cintiq 100 percent."

Despite the changes it has wrought, the Internet has been a tremendous boon to cartoonists, Maria says. She posts many of her efforts on her Facebook page. She's also growing more fond of Twitter, if for no reason other than that it serves as good practice for paring down the gag lines below her cartoons.

More than anything, the Internet allows her to get her work before more people than ever would have been possible in decades past. "There are so many avenues for creative people to be creative," she says. "We lost something in simplicity, but we gained so much in just the ability to get our work out there and the reach we have. I find it kind of funny that people in Istanbul are retweeting my comics."

What lies ahead for Maria, she hopes, is more of the same. She's busy with her daily cartoon, but wants to continue building on her other successes. Among her dreams is to have at least one cartoon appear in *The New Yorker*. She's already spent many a Tuesday at the magazine's offices, sitting in the waiting room with other hopefuls and showing the cartoon editor her latest offerings. She's had no luck so far in placing her work in that, the loftiest of peaks for those in her business, but she has no plans of giving up.

"I'm just going to continue to do what I'm doing," she says of her plans for the future, "just on a grander scale, I guess, is the best way to put it."

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