Why Is Everybody Always Pickin On Me?

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The Complete Peanuts will run 25 volumes, collecting two years chronologically at a rate of two a year for twelve years. Each volume is designed by the award-winning cartoonist Seth (It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken) and features impeccable production values; every single strip from Charles M. Schulz's 50-year American classic is reproduced better than ever before.

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I gave this collection 5 stars because the strip was still at its peak; but, ominously, this is where Peanuts starts to go down hill. The introduction of the Peppermint Patty character is the turning point, where the peak of Peanuts ends and the long decline from greatness begins.

Not that there was anything wrong with the Peppermint Patty character to begin with. The character was amusing as an occasional intruder into the Peanuts World; but, eventually, Peppermint Patty and the other characters introduced over the coming years came to take over the strip. This new concept of the strip was not as good as the original, and it got worse as years went by. This corruption of the pure original concept of Peanuts, combined with the shocking deterioration of Schulz's drawing ability in later years, clearly marks the end of Peanuts as the greatest of comic strips. Greatness is not the permanent condition of anybody or anything, and no peak lasts forever. Schulz had as long a peak period as any other comic strip artist (George Herriman being a possible exception), and I highly recommend this volume because it was in that peak period, though towards the end of it.
Peanuts was a great strip from the beginning, and it was on a continuous upward arc from there. By the early 60s, the cast of characters was as complete as it had to be, the addition of Charlie Browns nasty little sister Sally being the last necessary addition. Schulz possibly started running out of ideas for this cast and felt, to keep fresh, he had to bring in new faces. Unfortunately, the new faces weren't as good, or funny, as the originals. Peppermint Patty was the first of these newer characters. Peanuts was still pretty darned good for ten or so years after this, up to the mid-to-late 70s, but here is where Schulz started abandoning the original Peanuts characters and the newer cast was distinctly less inspired than was the original.

The newer characters reflected a creeping mellowness in his outlook, which is common for an artist growing older. (Some, like Mark Twain, get nastier and bitterer as they grow older, but, as in the case of Twain, this doesn't necessarily make them better either.) The newer characters were too nice. Peanuts, for all the (mistaken) talk of its heartwarming humor, was not sweetness and light on the comics page. It was a tale of rotten little kids being rotten to each other. This was the source of its greatness. That was the originality and innovation behind the strip. Once it became mellow and nice, it lost its originality and cutting edge.

However, though this volume represents the downward turn, it is still great stuff. Rereading it all these years later, I found it better than I remembered. When I was younger, I didn't really care for the Red Baron & Snoopy strips, thinking them too far away from the true gist of the strip. Now I found them very funny. Schulz started to play heavily on the Bleah vs. Nyahh arguments between Lucy, Violet and Snoopy, which were peaks in silly (but accurate and on-the-mark) humor. The grit your teeth baseball sequence, and Sally and her troubles with the New Math were other very inspired highlights.

Though there were bad signs of the decline to come towards the end of this volume, that decline hadn't set in yet. Peanuts had at least 2 more peak years to come, then 5 or 6 more very good years. Buy this, because it is one of the best volumes in the set, but mourn also, because here is where it starts to go down, down, down.

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