

## The New York Times

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# Baxter? Look Under Humor, Glen Opines

By Mary Blume

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**PARIS—** - Once when the cartoonist Glen Baxter was in New York the manager of a branch of Doubleday's didn't know where to look for him in his catalogue and only finally turned to humor. "A stab in the dark," Baxter opines. Opine is a favorite Baxter word, as in his caption, " 'To my mind there's no finer sight than kale moving at speed' opined Millward." Baxter wouldn't use a word as dull as said.

Despite fearful translation problems - "we are never quite sure if his captions are meant to be funny or flat," says Editions Hoëbcke, his French publisher - Baxter is much praised in France, where critics see the influence of Dada, Surrealism, Lewis Carroll, Heidegger and Swift.

"The French have fallen rather heavily, Germany has published one book so they're kind of dithering. The Dutch are coming, the Finns have fallen, the Swedes are about to go," Baxter declaims, taking on the tone of an empire builder in Boy Scout shorts. "We've annexed Australia and America. We're having little success in Tehran, I don't know why." He has been plagiarized in Japan.

Baxter was in Paris to open his show at the Samia Saouma gallery in the Marais. "Four madcap days," he tossed off. He has an overgrown crewcut, brindle beard and very clear blue eyes; his wife, Carol, looks like a merry Modigliani. His drawings of old-fashioned cowboys, pith-helmeted explorers and prim prewar young men and women combine square-jawed rectitude with absurdist terror (why is that little girl sawing a goldfish bowl in half?). Samuel Beckett meets Tom Mix.

His cartoons are poker-faced and look as if they had been done in poker work. Their very stillness is sinister: the menace behind the rosebush, the sense of looming fate. Not for nothing is one of his

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books called "The Impending Gleam": The word impending is Baxter in a nutshell.

"It's a good word, isn't it? I love that word." He is pleased that in Spanish the phrase means not only forthcoming ray of light but also a run in a lady's stocking. He gets fixated on words: For a while it was snoods, then wimples as in his caption, "As the purple shadows of twilight began to steal across the courtyard Eric's fingers quivered for a brief moment above the ruins of Mr. Bosworth's wimple."

"It's a really long caption but I love the way it holds it all in time and is slightly sinister. Why should he hide himself in the ruins of someone's wimple?" Why indeed? Especially when the wimple looks like an oil derrick.

Baxter was born in 1944 in Leeds, which he says is like growing up in monochrome. He liked the drawings of Charles Addams and Herriman's Krazy Kat, and at 12 fell for Perelman and Thurber when he was given a book of New Yorker fiction.

Later came Dada, Surrealism, Raymond Roussel and what Baxter calls the serious humor of Marcel Duchamp. A remark he saw in an interview with Jasper Johns sent him off to read Wittgenstein's "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," which led to a series of drawings in which Baxter cowboys speak Wittgenstein to each other. "I also did a drawing of Zulus in Africa discussing Wittgenstein in the original German," Baxter recalls.

Baxter's first success came not through drawing but through writing. He had been reading New York poetry magazines and was especially attracted by writers such as John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, who, like him, had been influenced by French Surrealism.

"They saw what I was doing as funny and mysterious so I was published in little poetry magazines in New York. When I first went to New York I read in St. Mark's, in the Bowery. I had on this tweed suit and I tried to read this little short story which was kind of stiff and odd and the audience just fell

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about laughing. The stiffer I was the funnier they thought it was. It was great.”

Until New York he hadn't known his writing was funny - “I'd shown people my work and they'd either fallen asleep or said, ‘Oh there's my taxi,’ so I didn't have an audience” - although he says his stories, like his later drawings, were little scenes. “And there's something, you know, slightly wrong, something that doesn't quite fit.”

His cowboys, when not spouting Wittgenstein or galloping past pictures (“Hank's tour of the Louvre usually lasted almost 18 minutes”), are Baxter's device for playing with archetypes.

“As a child I was exposed to all those B cowboy movies, Gabby Hayes stomping around saying ‘it jes' don't look right,’ so all these figures from literature and film got locked in my brain. They are sort of ideal for carrying the message because you're keying into a shared idea. It's the same with the very English types, they're archetypal figures.”

His drawings are aimed as much at the ear as at the eye. His feeling for words, he realized a few years ago when listening to Margaret Drabble at a strip joint, came from his past as a stammerer (the occasion was an ex-stammerers' meeting organized by the strip joint's owner).

“Margaret Drabble said that even when she's typing she drifts away from blocking words,” Baxter enunciated. Difficult words, he says, still stand out for him as if written against the sky, and stammerers become experts at circumlocution, as he learned as a boy.

“You can't ask the grocer ‘Can I have some oranges’ because you're going to immediately hit the word c-c-can, so you say, ‘Good morning, have you any oranges?’ Ofcourse the shop's full of oranges - who is this idiot? - so you're in the position of being slightly mad and also there's this fear involved. This childhood fear means I tinker with sentences until I've got them just about right.”

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Sometimes, not often, Baxter's cartoons are a simple joke ("It was a device for turning school meals back into food"). Usually he draws on what his friend Salman Rushdie calls casual bizarreries and which he finds everywhere in life. He ends his book, "Glen Baxter: His Early Struggles," with a bibliography of every book by someone named Baxter in the libraries of the British Museum and the University of Texas at Austin.

It is riveting, and totally surreal, reading: Henry Foster Baxter's "On Organic Polarity," Winifred J. Baxter's "The Edinburgh Handbook to Housework," "The Locker Room Ballads" of John E. Baxter, both "The Distribution of Load Along Nuts" and "The Fatigue of Bolts and Studs" by Allan Muir Baxter, Hugo F. Baxter's "Soi-Disant: Poems with Original Drawings," James Keir Baxter's "The Iron Breadboard," which may have been an inspiration for Glen Baxter's invention of pants in welded steel.

"One of my favorites is William Joseph Baxter, who wrote only two books. The first, in 1941, was called 'America and Japan must Work Together.' Timing was his forte, right? He followed this up with his masterpiece in 1946, 'Inflation Is Not Coming.'

"I thought, 'This guy is a genius,' " Glen Baxter intoned.