

The Most Famous Cartoonist in Brookfield

The New Yorker's
Ed Koren
Cherishes His Life
In Vermont

Ed Koren puts pen to paper
in Brookfield.

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ASK INTERNATIONALLY acclaimed cartoonist Ed Koren where he gets his ideas and he'll probably scrunch up his not insubstantial nose, level his twinkling dark brown eyes at you and say, "There's this little store in Iowa that sells wonderful, beautiful ideas. I just send away for them. Simple."

Then, after a few beats, a broad mustachioed smile will cross Koren's kindly face and he will let out a chuckle, confirming that he's just kidding. It is, after all, this uniquely talented artist's business — and his nature — to make people laugh.

"People *always* ask me about my ideas," confesses the trim, soft-spoken Koren as he perches in the wonderfully cluttered ("And to think I've just cleaned it up!") art studio that's part of his 1850s clapboard cape in Brookfield. "And I never know what to say. I guess my ideas come from being a contrarian and keeping my ears and eyes open." Koren, 68, pauses then adds, "I'm a feeder. I'm a whale that swallows all the krill of modern society and tries to process it."

Welcome to Ed Koren's unique and instantly recognizable world. It's a world that, as he notes, features "the middle class confronting every other class, and especially itself" and where the cartoonist explores pretension, bombast and incongruity. Koren's universe is inhabited by grizzled, hairy monsters, effete city folk in constant conflict with countrified good old boys, husbands being one-upped by their wives, precocious kids, chatty animals and the occasional talking vegetable. All the above, even the verbose veggies, boast Koren's trademark gargantuan schnozzolas and are drawn with the same elegantly jagged line, as if their creator had been live-wired to a seismograph.

Koren, considered by his legions of fans to be a national treasure, is perhaps best known for the more than 1,000 cartoons and illustrations he has contributed to *The New Yorker* over the last 41 years. His work has also appeared in countless other publications, from *The New York Times* to *Business Week* to *Sports Illustrated*, and he has published numerous collections of his cartoons as well as children's books. His cartoons and fine art prints have been exhibited internationally and some of his art is in the permanent collections of the Fogg Museum, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Princeton University Museum, Cambridge University's Fitzwilliam Museum and in the Swann Collection at the Library of Congress.

Author, illustrator, artist, printmaker, cartoonist; Koren wears many hats and they all seem to fit admirably. But he is best known for his unmistakable cartoons. As writer Bill McKibben noted in the foreword to one of Koren's books, "Ed is simply the funniest cartoonist in America, and has been for many years."

Dip anywhere into Koren's treasure trove of work, and his wry, slightly offbeat genius is immediately apparent:

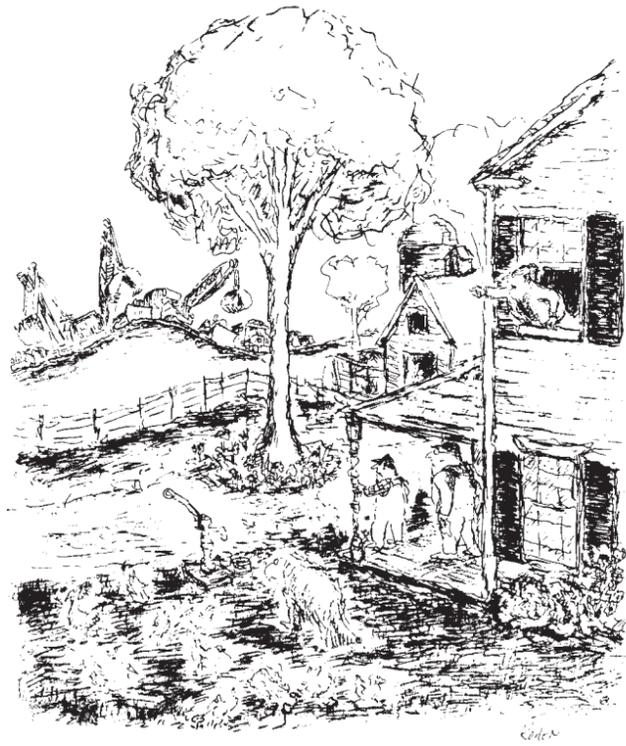
- A speaker stands at a lectern; behind him are half a dozen life-size numbers complete with unmistakable Korenesque faces. The caption reads: "Tonight, we're going to let the statistics speak for themselves."

- On the streets of New York a well-dressed woman looks solemnly into her male friend's eyes and tells him, "You are about to experience something rare in your life, Stan — rejection."

- At the entrance to a quintessentially picturesque New England village a large sign reads, "Entering Historic Brookfield, a Quaint Fishing Village with a Parking Problem."

As the last cartoon proves, sometimes Koren finds his inspiration for his creations as near as, well, his front yard. In 1987, after teaching at Brown University and working in New York City, he and his wife, Curtis, moved to Brookfield (population 1,149). Curtis, a former journalist and editor, is founder and executive director of Vermont Intercultural Semesters and co-teaches a class at nearby Sharon Academy. The couple, along with son Ben, 16, and a frisky Siamese cat named Catmandu, live in a rambling, restored 19th century home that has a great view of Brookfield's other claim to fame, the Floating Bridge that crosses Sunset Pond.

"Sometimes local references do pop up in my cartoons," admits Koren as he gives me a tour of his voluminous archives. Flipping through cartoon after cartoon, he chuckles to himself when he spots a favorite.



"Quick! Get your gun, Pa! Here come the suburbs."

"Here's a good example," he says. A boy at a McDonald's counter asks the clerk, "Could I have the fries *al dente*?" Standing nearby is a man wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with "Brookfield Football." "But," as Koren explains with a laugh, "we don't have a football team in Brookfield. We don't even have a high school."

Another cartoon depicts a chic woman, obviously a visitor to a country village, approaching a general store with four good old boys watching her from the store's front porch. In the window a large sign reads, "This is not a gallery." Above is a sign: "Floyd's Store." "That's Floyd's,



"We're only here summers, but Roger likes to be taken for a local."

after Floyd's General Store in Randolph Center. Al and Jan Floyd are friends," says Koren. Names of Koren's family and friends regularly appear in his cartoons; license plates often feature their birthdays.

For Koren, details and accuracy matter. He has included the interior of Charley O's, the colorful, somewhat tumbledown bar on Montpelier's Main Street, in several of his cartoons. "I got the idea for a cartoon in a bar and went there to get the atmosphere just right," he explains. "Great place; it's like a stage set." When he needs to draw a cemetery scene, he'll go to Montpelier's Green Mount cemetery. For a hospital interior he visits Randolph's Gifford Hospital.

It may surprise Koren's cartoon-loving fans to discover that his originals are much larger than they appear in magazines. He roughs out an idea in pencil then draws with pen and ink on 28-by-21-inch paper. "It feels natural to draw this size. I can get most of the detail and nuance I need," he explains. Sometimes it's the caption that comes first; sometimes it's the drawing. "I draw, I doodle; things pop into my head. While working on a cartoon, I range between total disaster and possibility."

He explains, "A cartoon is a frozen moment in time. It's like a joke in that you set up the situation, you establish the narrative, you dress the stage and you cast the proper actors. Then, somehow it has to all come together like *that!*" says Koren as he snaps his fingers loudly. He confesses to endless tinkering with both drawings and captions. "I'll read my captions out loud or perhaps run them by Curtis." A cartoon can take several days to get just right, Koren says. Then, "I just have to let it go. If I overdo it, I will kill it."

His style, like that of the best cartoonists, is instantly identifiable. As one critic noted, "With Mr. Koren's cartoons we are already laughing before we get to the caption." Writer Calvin Trillin, a longtime friend of

Koren's, jokes about the cartoonist's trademark jagged, fuzzy line: "I knew Ed Koren before his pen broke."

While his cartoons poke equal fun at urbanites and suburbanites and take well-aimed potshots at rapacious corporations and developers, a Koren cartoon is always affectionate. It leaves the reader with a smile and the feeling that there's been no harm done. Perhaps it's the lovable nature of the creatures that make up Koren's two-dimensional menagerie. Or is it the nature of the man himself?

"Hmm," says the man himself. "Good question."

Says Trillin: "His cartoons can be biting but never mean. Like Ed himself."



Ever since Koren moved to Brookfield, he has felt the need to give something back to the community. He's supported local causes, such as a drive to preserve the town hall, and donated drawings to help raise money for other worthy state and local projects.

A decade ago he started his one-man "Litter for Literacy" campaign by redeeming cans he finds along the roads during his daily runs. Friends followed his lead and each morning he finds a small pile of cans on his front lawn. The money raised, about \$350 so far, has been donated to the Brookfield Elementary School library. "I harvest the road for books," he says with a wry smile.

Koren's commitment to his community goes even deeper. Shortly after he arrived in Brookfield, he volunteered for the local volunteer fire department. "After teaching, I'd had it with sitting on committees," he remembers. "I wanted to do something with immediate results."

For the last 16 years he's been an active member of the Brookfield Volunteer Fire Department. Like other members, he wears a pager 24 hours a

day and is ready to drop everything — in his case, his pencil, pen or paintbrush — and rush to the scene of an accident or fire. "The dirty little secret is that it's a lot of fun and a lot of grunt work," Koren tells me as we sit in his studio. "And it's the perfect counterpoint to my sitting here working all day."

The 20-member team responds to an average of two or three calls a month. These can be everything from a burning house to a grisly traffic accident on nearby Interstate 89 to a raging brush fire. "Some of my friends think I'm nuts,

Koren has served with the Brookfield Volunteer Fire Department for 16 years. "I wanted to do something with immediate results," he says.

but most understand that I love it," says Koren. Roger Angell, a *New Yorker* writer and editor and longtime friend, explains, "Ed loves Vermont and takes his role with the fire department very seriously. I know he's very proud of what he's done there." Adds Calvin Trillin, "I think of Ed as a fireman who does cartooning on the side. I call him 'the Fire Commissioner.'"

As Koren shows me a picture of the Brookfield firefighters posing in front of their vintage truck, he tells me, "Volunteering is the soul of a rural community. And it has its rewards. I wouldn't know all these great people here if I hadn't joined the fire department." In a poignant article he wrote for *The New York Times*, Koren noted, "The work I do with the department, the solidarity I feel with its members, gives me more pride and satisfaction than a lifetime of professional accomplishment. And I'm proud of the skills I've mastered, which have nothing to do with my own profession."

To keep in shape, the wiry, 5-foot-7-inch Koren runs, bikes, kayaks or cross-country skis every day. He has run in four New York City Marathons and hopes to complete one more to celebrate his 70th birthday. "I've got to get outside once a day or I go nuts," he explains. "Being outdoors is really a spiritual necessity for me."

A few years ago Roger Angell visited the Korens over a winter weekend. "Ed is the most energetic person I know," says Angell. "After a day of cross-country skiing we had an enormous dinner and I wanted to take it easy. Not Ed. At 11:30 p.m. he roused everybody and insisted we all go on a long moonlight walk. In sub-zero temperatures! Enthusiastic doesn't even begin to describe Ed Koren."

Angell remembers another time when Ed, Curtis and Ben showed up at his Maine summer house for a weekend. "They had so much recreational gear

crammed into their Saab — kayaks, bikes, swim fins, you name it — that I yelled to my wife, 'You've got to see this; the Korens have arrived with the entire contents of the L.L. Bean catalog.' " (Koren, the consummate cartoonist, borrowed his friend's line and used it in a cartoon subsequently published in *The New Yorker*.)

Now and then an Ed Koren fan will find his or her way to Brookfield and seek an audience with the cartoonist. Aspiring artists and students call or write to ask his advice. He always seems happy to oblige. "Why not?" asks Koren and laughs. "It's not as if I'm besieged. In the great celebrity pecking order, I don't think cartoonists rate very highly."

Lots of his neighbors, claims Koren, don't know exactly what he does. "That's O.K. with me; I'd rather not be well known."

For most of the residents of Brookfield it's enough to know that he is one of the brave local volunteers ready, at a moment's notice, to put their lives on the line for them or their property.

With his firefighter's pager clipped securely to his belt, Koren sips coffee in his art studio and seems perfectly content with his world. "Every day I think how lucky I am to live the way I do and make a living doing what I do," he tells me. "You can't ask much more than that, can you?"



Freelance writer Robert Kiener lives in Stowe. Photographer Rose McNulty lives in Burlington.