



CONTEMPORARY
Cartoon Creators

**Seth MacFarlane
and Family Guy**

Gail Snyder

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CHAPTER TWO

Family Guy: TV's Most Shocking Show

Seth MacFarlane spent months drawing images for the pilot at his kitchen table, finally producing an eight-minute version of *Family Guy* for network broadcast. After seeing the brief pilot, Fox executives green-lighted the series. Says Sandy Grushow, president of 20th Century Fox Television, “That the network ordered a series off of eight minutes of film is just testimony to how powerful those eight minutes were. There are very few people in their early 20’s who have ever created a television series.”²⁰

Family Guy made its debut on network television on January 31, 1999—right after Fox’s telecast of the Super Bowl. The show imported the *Life of Larry* and *Larry & Steve* dynamic of a bumbling dog owner and his pet (renamed Peter Griffin and Brian, respectively) and expanded the supporting family to include wife, Lois; older sister, Meg; middle child, Chris; and baby, Stewie. The audience for the *Family Guy* debut was recorded at 22 million. Given the size of the audience, Fox believed MacFarlane had produced a hit and offered him \$1 million a year to continue production. “Sit down when I tell you this,” he told his mother in a phone call. “They are paying me a million dollars a year.”²¹

For a young animator still in his mid-twenties, the salary seemed astronomical. But MacFarlane earned his money. Fox gave MacFarlane a small budget, meaning he lacked the team of animators and technicians assigned to produce *The Simpsons*. Therefore, he found himself doing much of the hands-on animation himself—while also carrying out the other jobs of producer and voice actor. Like *The Simpsons*, MacFarlane centers the show on a family, the Griffins, as they navigate life in fictional Quahog, Rhode Island. Along the way, Peter’s

moronic and impulsive behaviors, Brian's intellectual wit, and Stewie's lust for power become lenses through which MacFarlane provides both insight into and satire of contemporary culture. The humor is often crude, and nothing—from politics to popular television—is spared playful and pointed mockery.

Controversy and Cancellation

As the show found more viewers, Fox increased the budget. But as the show gained in popularity, so did the backlash against MacFarlane's brand of humor, which operates on the supposition that nothing is sacred. For example, during one *Family Guy* episode Jesus Christ shows up at the local mall, where he encounters the Griffins. Jesus admits he will not be spending his birthday with his indifferent father and confesses that he has never had a date. The portrayal of Christ angered many Christians, but the show consistently ruffled feathers while maintaining a large audience share early on. The Parents Television Council criticized the show for its emphasis on gags dependent on sexual themes. Other viewers remarked that the show wallowed in its crudity. Ken Tucker, TV critic for the magazine *Entertainment Weekly*, said the show's content lacked originality. He commented, “[*Family Guy* is] conceived by a singularly sophomoric mind that lacks any reference point beyond other TV shows.”²²

Moreover, despite *Family Guy*'s initial success, by the third season the ratings started dropping. This was due in part to the network's decision to move the show around in its schedule, ultimately placing it in competition with the popular situation comedy *Friends*. In 2002 *Family Guy* was canceled.

“That the network ordered a series off of eight minutes of film [of *Family Guy*] is just testimony to how powerful those eight minutes were. There are very few people in their early 20's who have ever created a television series.”²⁰

—Sandy Grushow, president of 20th Century Fox Television.

The Griffins Return to Prime Time

MacFarlane literally went back to the drawing table, working on concepts for new shows to pitch to network bosses. Meanwhile, reruns of *Family Guy* started airing nightly as part of the Cartoon Network's



A still of the Griffin family at a picnic. From left to right: Brian, the dog; Meg; Chris; Peter; Lois; and Stewie. Although Family Guy often critiques popular social issues, using a nuclear family as a focal point allows MacFarlane and his writers to explore and poke fun at family relationships as well.

evening package of shows known as Adult Swim. The show quickly became the most popular feature on Adult Swim. Moreover, in 2003 Fox packaged a season of *Family Guy* episodes in a DVD boxed set. It sold 3 million copies. By then the Fox executives decided they had erred in canceling *Family Guy* and invited MacFarlane back with a budget big enough for him to hire a large staff.

No one was more surprised than MacFarlane about the show's unlikely comeback. Called to a meeting with Gary Newman, 20th Century Fox Television's president, he did not know what to expect. MacFarlane recalled, "[Newman] said, 'We'd like to put this back into production,' and I almost fell out of my chair."²³ The revived show's premiere aired in May 2005, drawing 12 million viewers.

Now just thirty-two years old, MacFarlane had gone from drawing comic strips for a small-town newspaper to being one of the hot-

test animation producers in Hollywood. He achieved his success through his natural talent as an artist and impressionist, hard work, and a keen insight into what makes people laugh.

MacFarlane's Ongoing Role in *Family Guy*

Once MacFarlane had a large staff at his disposal, the artistic process changed. For example, he no longer draws all the stills by hand or writes every word of dialogue. Today it takes a staff of more than three hundred people on two continents to produce *Family Guy*. Working in studios and offices in Los Angeles, writers conceive the gags that pour out of the mouths of the characters, and actors lend their voices to those characters. In the studio where the actors record their lines, technicians control the quality of the audio, and a director decides whether the acting meets the standards expected by the audience. It is not unusual for the actors to run through the dialogue several times.

Meanwhile, artists work with ink and paper as well as digital tools on computer screens, creating images. The drawings that leave the Los Angeles studio are not much more than rough outlines of each episode. The images head next for a studio in South Korea, where the final full-color episodes are animated and made ready for broadcast.

Watching over virtually every facet of the show's production is MacFarlane. He is part of the writing team. He provides the voices for nearly a dozen regular and cameo characters. He still provides art for the show—producing rough sketches for some of the key scenes—before they are turned over to the show's animators. “I still do a lot of the drawing on a daily basis,”²⁴ he says.

A snapshot of the energy that goes into each *Family Guy* episode can be found at the table read, the first opportunity for the actors to speak their lines. Sitting around a table, scripts in hand, the actors perform a read-through of the episode. During the table read, jokes are tested, the timing of the dialogue is worked out, and the actors experiment with the nuances of their voices, giving human qualities to the characters.

Man of Many Voices

Since MacFarlane provides the voices for so many characters, he spends a lot of time during the table read making sure the sounds uttered by Peter and the others are exactly how he wants the audience

Mining 9/11 for Laughs

The emotions Americans feel about the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center in New York City and Pentagon in Washington, DC, remain raw even today. While 9/11 is considered off-limits as a topic by many entertainers, Seth MacFarlane and *Family Guy* have felt no such restrictions. In a 2011 episode, Stewie and Brian travel back to 2001 to prevent the terrorist attacks. In doing so, however, they change the world in ways they had not intended, leading to another American civil war. Realizing their error, the two characters undo what they did, high-fiving themselves on their successful mission—failing to prevent the attacks that took the lives of some three thousand people.

Ironically, MacFarlane was supposed to have been a passenger on American Airlines Flight 11—the second airplane to strike the World Trade Center. MacFarlane missed the flight because he overslept that morning.

MacFarlane acknowledges that the 2001 terrorist attacks remain a sensitive topic among many people, but as a comedy writer he feels a responsibility to explore all events in modern culture—even those with tragic consequences—as sources of humor. He says, “After the fact, it was sobering, but people have a lot of close calls; you’re crossing the street and you almost get hit by a car . . . this one just happened to be related to something massive. I really can’t let that affect me because I’m a comedy writer. I have to put that in the back of my head.”

Quoted in *Daily Mail Reporter*, “Have They Finally Crossed the Line? *Family Guy* Causes Outrage as Characters High-Five in Celebration of 9/11 Attacks,” *Daily Mail* (London), November 15, 2011. www.dailymail.co.uk.

animated show, *The Cleveland Show*. For the new program, Cleveland, who had been one of *Family Guy*’s few African American characters, moved from Quahog, Rhode Island, to his original hometown of Stoolbend, Virginia, along with his fourteen-year-old son, Cleveland Jr. Once back home, he wed his high school sweetheart and formed a new family with her two children.

As with *American Dad!*, MacFarlane served as executive producer and worked on the writing team. He also gave voice to one of the characters, Tim the Bear—a neighbor of the show’s protagonists, Cleveland and Donna Brown—who just happens to be a talking bear.

Polarizing Character

During the show’s run Cleveland’s ethnicity was always in the forefront. In the first episode, Peter Griffin, Cleveland’s friend, expressed surprise that African American men cry; he thought they were capable only of anger.

Tom Shales, a critic from the *Washington Post*, had this to say about that type of joke in *The Cleveland Show*: “The humor doesn’t necessarily promote racial stereotypes, but whenever a crude joke can be made out of it, Cleveland’s race is mentioned—over and over, in scene after scene. The message that young viewers receive is that racial minorities are different, separate, apart from the norm.”³¹

MacFarlane counters that it is better for a show to be polarizing—to offend some people—than to be pleasant and bland. “Cleveland is a polarizing character,” he says. “People either love him or they’re bored with him.”³²

The show lasted four seasons before its cancellation in 2013. Rather than abandoning the character, Cleveland returned to *Family Guy*, moving back to Quahog to resume his friendship with Peter. Meanwhile, the writers crafted jokes mostly focusing on Cleveland’s failure to thrive on his own.

No Time to Be Sick

Even with the cancellation of *The Cleveland Show*, MacFarlane’s insistence on maintaining a hand in virtually every aspect of his shows leaves him little time for leisure. “I don’t get vacations,” he says. “I once went for fifteen months, working seven days a week, and I put myself in the hospital, just from exhaustion.”³³

Because MacFarlane is so involved with his shows, particularly with *Family Guy*, when he is ill the tight production schedule gets

IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF SETH MACFARLANE

1973

Seth Woodbury MacFarlane is born on October 26 in Kent, Connecticut.

1975

As a toddler, MacFarlane draws Fred Flintstone and Woody Woodpecker on grocery bags.

1982

He is hired to draw the weekly comic strip *Walter Crouton* by the *Kent Good Times Dispatch*, a job he continues until graduating from high school.

1985

His work as a cartoonist is profiled in his hometown newspaper, the *Litchfield County Times*.

1991

MacFarlane enrolls in the Rhode Island School of Design after graduating from Kent School, a private prep school.

1996

MacFarlane is hired as an animator and writer by Hanna-Barbera after graduating from Rhode Island School of Design.

1999

Family Guy debuts after the Super Bowl.

2002

Fox cancels *Family Guy* due to poor ratings but brings it back three years later.

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