

Matthew Abram Groening (1954–)

By Don Hamilton

Matt Groening, who grew up in Portland, created *The Simpsons*, the longest running prime time television show in history. The animated show chronicles the adventures and misadventures of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie Simpson of Springfield, in a state undetermined. The program set a new bar for clever, witty television and was populated with people, places, and memories of Groening's childhood in Portland. In their more than four decades on the air, Groening's characters have embedded themselves in American culture, eliciting smiles from Oregonians who understand the hidden meaning behind the names Flanders, Quimby, Kearney, Lovejoy, and so many more.

Matthew Abram Groening was born in Portland on February 15, 1954, the middle of five children (Mark, Patty, Lisa, and Maggie). His mother, Margaret Wiggum, was an English teacher, and his father, Homer Groening, was a filmmaker and cartoonist who brought pens and pads of paper home to his children to encourage their creativity. They lived on Evergreen Terrace near Washington Park. A big part of Matt Groening's childhood was comics, which he read at the Stadium Fred Meyer and later at local hippie head shops like the Psychedelic Supermarket, which sold the underground comics Zap, Yellow Dog, and the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers.

There are subtle and not so subtle similarities to Groening's Portland and Bart Simpson's Springfield. Like Springfield, where the Simpson family lives, the Portland of Groening's childhood had a scenic gorge, a polluted river, and a nearby nuclear power plant. Both towns have forests and parks and snowcapped mountains and surly teenaged bullies who might beat you up. And like Springfield, Groening's Portland was a world of beauty and adventure that existed alongside arrogance and hypocrisy.

Groening went to the Methodist church, the summer camp at Spirit Lake on Mount St. Helens, and attended the comfortably middle-class Ainsworth Elementary and Lincoln High Schools. He was a Boy Scout and swam for the exclusive Multnomah Athletic Club. His high school classmates elected him student body president, and he starred in a school play. He was also a rebel who pushed back against the affluent Portland West Hills and the city's mainstream institutions he was connected to.

At Lincoln High School, Groening and his friends energized the Film Group and created Teens for Decency, a supposed political faction with the slogan "If you're against decency, what are you for?"—a play on the Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative youth group. The group published an underground newspaper called *Bilge Rat*, which featured reprints of a hated male teacher who had been a Sears underwear model, and devised a Lincoln High board game. They invented the Banana Gang, an imaginary group of greaser thugs they blamed for practical jokes around the school, such as smearing locker locks with bananas. In that age of rebellion, their efforts gleefully mocked mainstream culture and school administrators and their policies.

Groening helped form the Komix Appreciation Club, a half-dozen budding cartoonists who gathered in the school library at lunchtime to practice their art. His friends Tim Smith and Dan Heims made 16mm short films, a few featuring Groening, including *Salmon Street Saga* and *Lightning Tour of Lincoln*, a sixty-second race through the school's hallways. *Drugs: Killers or Dillers?* included a crazed clown with an eggbeater, an image Groening would include in *The Simpsons*, usually in mob scenes fashioned after monster movies where villagers carry torches and pitchforks.

Groening attended Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where students often design their own degrees. At age twenty-three, after he was turned down for a reporting job at the *Oregonian*, he went south to Los Angeles and in 1977 started producing *Life in Hell*, a comic about his professional misadventures through the eyes of Binky, a one-eared rabbit. He sold the comic at Licorice Pizza, a record store; it was later picked up by *Wet* magazine and the *Los Angeles Reader*, an alt-weekly where he got a job. The comic won an audience in the influential world of Los Angeles bookstores and in alt newspapers around the country. Groening told his friend Dan Heims that he loved the strip because it was *him*, bereft of a roomful of writers. He continued to produce *Life in Hell* until 2012.

In 1986, producer James L. Brooks offered Groening a chance to do animated TV shorts on the Tracey Ullman Show. Fearing he would lose the rights to *Life in Hell* if he animated the strip for Fox Broadcasting, he stepped into a lobby and in fifteen minutes sketched out the Simpsons as we know them today, using characters named after his family. The animated shorts became *The Simpsons*, which debuted in 1989 and is now in its thirty-fifth season. The satirical spirit of Groening's early creative efforts runs through *The Simpsons*, which has been applauded for its clever send-up of American culture by exposing its absurdities and shortcomings through the experiences of a dysfunctional but devoted family.

Groening went on to co-create *Futurama* and *Disenchantment* and to publish the Bongo Comic Group in 1993. He has won more than a dozen Emmys and in 2012 received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. He married twice and has nine children—his eldest two are named Homer and Abe. He has kept his creative hand in *The Simpsons*, overseeing the show's licensing and merchandising, and remains a television powerhouse.

Although Groening has become wildly successful in California, he still considers himself an Oregonian and says he plans to come back someday. Lincoln High School has several of his large drawings on exhibit. In 2021, the City of Portland named the Northwest Flanders Street bike/pedestrian bridge the Ned Flanders Crossing after the Simpson family's next-door neighbor, a fitting bit of synergy considering that the character Ned Flanders was named for the street in the first place.

Sources

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