

Braiker, Brian. "I Married R. Crumb." *Newsweek* (March 11, 2005).

I Married R. Crumb

Q&A: R. Crumb's Wife Tells All!

The underground comic-book artist's wife discusses 30 years of living with a 'cranky old guy'

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Brian Braiker

Newsweek

Updated: 9:57 a.m. CT March 11, 2005



Courtesy MQ Publications

Aline with Crumb in the late 1980s: 'He'd be dead without me'

March 10 - When we last saw Aline Kominsky-Crumb, she was packing up her things with her piggyback-happy husband and heading for France. In Terry Zwigoff's documentary "Crumb," an unsettling family portrait if ever there was one, Aline seemed determined to find a more peaceful place for her man, cult icon **Robert Crumb**. America had let him down.

Aline, however, has not. Together for more than 30 years, the couple has a daughter (Sophie, who like both of her parents is a cartoonist) and enough memories to fill several books—which they have. The two also contribute regular strips to the *New Yorker* magazine from their hideaway home in rural France. They

have achieved a special symbiosis in their relationship—she compares their rapport to that of George Burns, the straight man, and his beloved ditz, Gracie Allen.

But what is domestic life like with a philandering neurotic whose most disturbing work hints at a psyche riddled with racism, misogyny, fetishism and, possibly, genius? Aline Kominsky-Crumb discussed these issues, and more, in a recent conversation with NEWSWEEK's Brian Braiker about the publication of "The R. Crumb Handbook." Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: This book is getting a big response in Europe. Why do you think Robert's work seems to resonate there? Aline Kominsky-Crumb:

He's been acknowledged by museums a lot over the last few years. He had a big retrospective show at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, in Germany. He was in the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. So I think he's being recognized in that world. It's also our age. When you turn 60 you start getting taken seriously. He's just hung in there long enough.

I would imagine Zwigoff's documentary probably helped. Do you think that was a fair representation of him? It's a very personal intimate representation of the whole Crumb family by a very close friend. It's not necessarily an objective view, but it's a very intimate view. It wasn't just about Robert's work. It was almost more about his brother, Charles, than it was about him. Very personal. None of us thought it would be a widely distributed successful film; that's partially why we allowed it to be made.

Knowing what you know now, would you have still participated? No.

But a lot of his own work is so revealing and personal. Yes but he chooses what to reveal and print media is not the same as film. The invasion and the level of notoriety of being in a film is much more invasive in your life than doing comics. If your head is on this giant screen and you're not an actor, you feel this vulnerability. It's horrifying. It's you and your crazy family for all the world to see. And we thought we were making this little arty documentary that only a few thousand people who were fans of Robert would see.

You two collaborate a lot. Does it gel well? Do you guys fight? We consider ourselves George Burns and Gracie Allen when we're working. Robert's

kind of the straight man—he sets me up and I take all the pratfalls. One person will start and maybe do three drawings in pencil and the other responds. Because it goes back and forth like an improvisational play, it's really the most fun way to work. It's much harder to work on our own for each of us.

In a recent interview he described himself as an “ineffectual individual,” which is surprising for someone with such a prodigious output. Do you think he could survive without a woman like yourself in his life? No, he wouldn't. He'd be dead without me. [*Laughs.*] When I met him his life was such a wreck. He's really a soft guy. He just wants to be liked too much. When he says ineffectual, he just can't say no to people. There are always parasites ready to jump on somebody like that. So I'm the bad cop.

He's always been criticized for being misogynistic and racist. You live with him. Is there any truth to that? Not at all. People just don't get satire. He pokes fun at every single stereotype in our society equally. He touches all the tender points of people's innate racism and sexism and ethnocentric attitudes which are all there just under the surface. When he does a thing about the “The Family That Lays Together Stays Together,” anyone who thinks that he's proposing that people should indulge in incest would have to be pretty dumb.

Even in his earliest drawings there seems to be a nostalgia there for an era that never existed. Absolutely. He's nostalgic a period that he missed. The music that he loves is from the '20s and '30s. It's from a more simple, rural America that probably never did really exist.

His own self-image is negative too. Do you think drawing himself in that way is a cathartic sort of way? Or is that really the way he thinks? He's been a cranky old guy since he was 25 years old. I've been with him for over 30 years. He was like an old man when he was young. Now he's an old, old man. [*Laughs.*] Without drawing, I can't imagine how bad he'd be. In his old age, I have to say, he's become a lot more mellow.

You have an open relationship? I'll say a flexible relationship. I was 23 years old when I started living with him, and I'm now 57. We've grown and changed together and been through a lot of other relationships with other people. We have a very deep bond that is unbreakable. For our particular natures we've had to keep

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things somewhat open in order to continue growing as artists, as people. I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to anybody else.

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