



Peter Guttridge grimaces at the magazine of the decade

Vizual Jokes

'What's your best joke?' the woman from the tabloids asks editor Chris Donald at the press conference to celebrate 10 years of *Viz* comic. For a moment, 29-year old Donald looked like a teacher had just caught him doing something under his desk. Slumped in his seat, he reddened and wriggled, mumbling so much that his impatient interlocutor snapped, 'Could you please speak up'.

Donald started drawing cartoons as a schoolboy and continued when he went to work for the DHSS in Newcastle. His best joke is probably that the cartoon characters he developed then are now the core of the decade's most successful magazine. With audited sales of 650,000 in the middle of last year, *Viz* hoped to sell 1m copies of its Christmas issue, making it the third most popular magazine in Britain. Copies of the first issue, which had a print run of 150 and cost £60 to produce, are now worth £1,000 each.

Primarily a magazine for young people, *Viz* now sells in newsagents and record shops throughout the country. Donald sold the first issue in pubs in Newcastle. Although circulation increased over the next few issues, it was only when Virgin Books took over publishing it in 1985, that *Viz* really took off. Now independent of Virgin, it will shortly be printing in Australia and there is talk of an animated feature.

It's hard to believe that there are so many naughty schoolboys around. For *Viz* is an adult development of those old schoolyard favourites, *Dandy* and *The Beano*. It takes their unreal notions (like Desperate Dan eating



giant cow pies with hooves sticking out) to crude extremes. There are hints too of Monty Python and *Private Eye*. The comic was sued £100 once for using a picture of a guy's house as the illustration for a spoof article about a man who claimed to have had sex with himself.

The jokes are mostly about shit, vomit, funny smells and coarse sex. Cartoon regulars include 'Felix And His Amazing Underpants', 'Buster Gonad And His Unfeasibly Large Testicles' and 'Johnny Fartpants'. Felix uses his y-fronts to store chocolates (the chocolates melt) and for his dad to be sick in. Buster carts his balls about in a wheelbarrow. Johnny farts.

Cartoons like this are for readers who snigger rather than laugh, smirk rather than smile. *Viz* ain't subtle: the *Viz* annuals are called *The Big Hard One*, *The Big Hard One No.2*, *The Pink Stiff One* and *The Dog's Bollocks*.

It should come as no surprise that, according to a market survey in 1988, 85% of *Viz* readers are male. 49% are under 25, 33% under 20. Among the teenagers, 61% are in education, 29% are employed, 10% unemployed.

Viz has been accused of misogyny and sexism for cartoon characters like Millie Tant (the ugly, gay feminist), Nude Motorcycle Girl and The Fat Slags (who now feature in a controversial lager ad). But there is a certain knowing ambiguity about the punchlines of these cartoons which suggests an awareness of the issues they tackle and a deliberate attempt to stir the waters.

It is difficult to say how seriously the team who produce the comic take their humour. At the press conference they eschewed politics: 'Other people are knocking Thatcher, we don't need to.' Donald also implied they were not crude for crudity's sake. He remarked, 'People seem to think if they send us something crude, it will automatically be put in. It won't.'

The only criterion he came up with for what would be included was that the team should find it funny. Donald was also dismissive of the competitor magazines *Viz's* success has spawned. 'Well, they're rubbish aren't they?' says Donald. 'They've fallen short of the mark. And it's interesting that they're published by soft-porn merchants trying to get on the

bandwagon.'

Here too, *Viz's* position is ambiguous. Many of the ads in the magazine are the kind that occur in soft-porn mags. Sexual self-help phone lines down which you can get everything from a guided tour of the female genitals, to advice on anal and oral sex. On first seeing the range of lines you can call up - Bonkin' In The Sewers, Ever Felt A Right Tit or the Puke And Vomit Line - this reader wondered if they were a put-on, another aspect of the magazine's humour. They're real though.

Other ads follow the tenor of the comic. You can buy a cassette of farts and belches (including 'Pan Splatters', 'Honking Frog' and 'Wet Surprise') or a 'Dick Tie'.

It's easy to sound po-faced about *Viz*, especially when only 1% of its readers fall into my age range. *Viz* is in the English tradition of schoolboy comics, dirty seaside postcards and Monty Python. Ben Elton tells jokes about 'stiffies'. Steve Bell's cartoons are hard and grotesque. But Elton and Bell have something to say. *Viz*, like *Private Eye*, hasn't got much to say - but it's saying it anyway. •

