

Berke Breathed In Full Bloom

Thursday night, 11:15, and Berke Breathed has one cartoon left to go. Over the past 29 hours, without stopping to sleep, he's drawn 13 days' worth of daily "Bloom County" strips. But, wanting to ship the panels at 12:43 on a flight from Denver's Stapleton Airport, 44 miles away,

he has no time to waste. Working up to the last minute because he likes the energy this gives the strip, Breathed deftly inks the figure of Opus the penguin into the first panel. Then he glues photocopies of the first Opus onto subsequent panels and adds background details and dialogue. "This is going down to the wire," he mutters to his wife, who prepares to pack the cartoons into a box. Finished at 11:37, Breathed grabs the sealed box of strips and sprints out to his turbocharged Mazda RX-7. After skidding down the mountain on dirt roads, he barrels along I-70 at 80 to 100 mph—closely monitoring his radar detector. At 12:21, Breathed trots up to the Eastern Airlines counter and checks in his package with 13 minutes to spare. Still, there's a note of disappointment when he says, almost apologetically, "I didn't make very good time."

Is this any way to run a comic strip? Well, consider the results. Six years after Breathed first started it, "Bloom County" is one of the most popular comic strips

in the country, running in 999 newspapers—430 daily, 319 Sunday and 250 college. Three earlier books that have collected "Bloom County"—"Loose Tails," "Toons for Our Times" and "Penguin Dreams and Other Stranger Things"—have each sold more than 600,000 copies, and a new, comprehensive sampling, "Bloom County Babylon," rocketed onto the best-seller lists as soon as it was published a month ago. Stuffed-animal versions of the strip's major character, Opus, constitute some of the hottest-selling items for Dakin, a leading manufacturer of plush toys. And more than 1.2 million T shirts adorned with "Bloom County" characters have found their way onto the backs of loyal fans. Not bad for someone who freely admits, "I'm not an artist. Believe me, you don't have to be one to do a comic strip."

Well, maybe yes and maybe no. It takes no small amount of talent to make believable and even

