

Kent Quarterly

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Catching up with Seth MacFarlane '91

STORY BY
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By the time Seth MacFarlane '91 arrived as a 14-year-old student at Kent School, he had already been publishing a weekly comic strip in the local Kent newspaper for five years. The son of two Kent School employees, MacFarlane grew up near campus, revealing his obvious early talent to a town and a school that embraced his creativity with “full-throated support across the board from day one.”

Throughout his time at Kent, MacFarlane continued to hone his skills in comedy, music, and theater, and as a cartoonist for the student newspaper, *Kent News*, deftly sketching out a four-year running commentary on school life. His talent led to a degree in animation from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and has since evolved into a multi-faceted career as an animator, writer, actor, producer, director, comedian, and singer. He's received multiple Emmy Awards (including four for Outstanding Character Voice-Over Performance, tying him for the most voice-over Emmy wins of all time) and been nominated for an Academy Award (Best Original Song) and five Grammy Awards

(including three for Best Traditional Pop Vocal Album). MacFarlane was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 2020 and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

A common theme through it all has been MacFarlane's use of his voice, whether breathing life into characters for the animated TV shows “Family Guy” and “American Dad!” or to the lovable, foul-mouthed teddy bear in the film and TV franchise “Ted” (season two is premiering soon on Peacock and a new animated series is currently in production), or using his distinct baritone to record his ninth studio album, 2025's “Lush Life: The Lost Sinatra Arrangements”—and much more.



Two years removed from his induction into the Sill Society, MacFarlane spoke from Los Angeles with contributing writer Jana Brown about his time at Kent, his musical influences, the future of AI in animation, and why creative education is so important.

JANA: Your parents both worked at Kent. What were some of your favorite memories of growing up near campus, and what were some of your favorite places to explore?

SETH: I never lived on the Valley campus. I lived in a duplex that they offered us with four friends of mine up on the Hill campus, right next to the Cloutier's house. But I was a day student for the first few years, and my mother worked in admissions and in college guidance, so it was a nice thing to be able to go hang out in her office after class for a little bit. It's such a beautiful campus. Whenever I go back there, I'm reminded of just how stunning it is—the whole town is stunning, but I took it for granted when I was there. The place is like a beautifully landscaped park from end to end.

JANA: Any favorite places on campus while you were a student?

SETH: I don't recall ever having a hangout spot of any kind, but that area next to the chapel that overlooks the hockey rink is very serene and tranquil. I remember they had that snack bar right next to Mattison Auditorium. I don't know if it's still there, but they used to make very good fries.

JANA: That's a key to any campus, good fries, I believe, right?

SETH: Yup.

JANA: Your father still lives in Kent. When you come back, who and what do you see? What do you do? Is there a food you like to eat there?

SETH: The last time I was there, I had dinner at the Fife 'n Drum, and Kingsley Tavern is always a must. Anna [Gowan] is an old friend, and she's done an incredible job putting that place together. Those are the two spots I usually hit first. Swyft is also very good. I've only eaten there once, but it was excellent. Those are the three I've frequented recently when I've been back in Kent.

JANA: When you were at Kent, you were the cartoonist for *Kent News*. That wasn't your first published work since you had a weekly comic strip in the local paper from the age of nine. Do you remember some of the subjects and the reactions they produced on campus?

SETH: That's a very good question. It's so hard to remember specific strips. I remember there was a character named Jack Kent who had sort of an Ed



Grimley [of SCTV and "Saturday Night Live" fictional character fame] swirl to his haircut. I hope I'm getting this right. At the time, I think Tim Scott was running the paper for those four years, and he had titled the strip "Looking Up" during my freshman year; "Looking Out" during sophomore and junior years; and "Looking Down" in my senior year. It's been a while, but I'm pretty sure he was the faculty member who was in charge of the newspaper, which made sense. He was such an incredibly dynamic teacher and made everything entertaining.

JANA: Do you remember people talking about what you were drawing?

SETH: Not in a granular sense. I remember I did caricatures of my teachers and of faculty, and I seem to remember those being used as kind of a freeze around the edge of the paper from time to time.

JANA: How did the early reaction to your

work, including in the *Kent Good Times Dispatch* and in *Kent News*, encourage you that you were on the right track creatively, and how has that continued throughout your career?

SETH: It's funny, the *Kent Good Times Dispatch* [GTD] was a fantastic way to put my foot in the water. It did not take long to generate controversy, I do remember that. I think very early on, when I was about 9 or 10, I did a cartoon that had a guy at communion at St. Andrews, and he says, "Can I have fries with that?" And the local priest at the time sent a letter saying, "Shame on you for insulting the Almighty God and those who love Him." So that was certainly an introduction to what would become a much more frequent occurrence in my career; that is, stirring up controversy through cartoons.

JANA: Do you enjoy that, kind of pushing the envelope?

SETH: I don't set out to do it. I set out to get laughs. Really, that's the goal. If something is pushing the line at the same time, it always has to be justifiably funny first. So, I don't ever really set out to

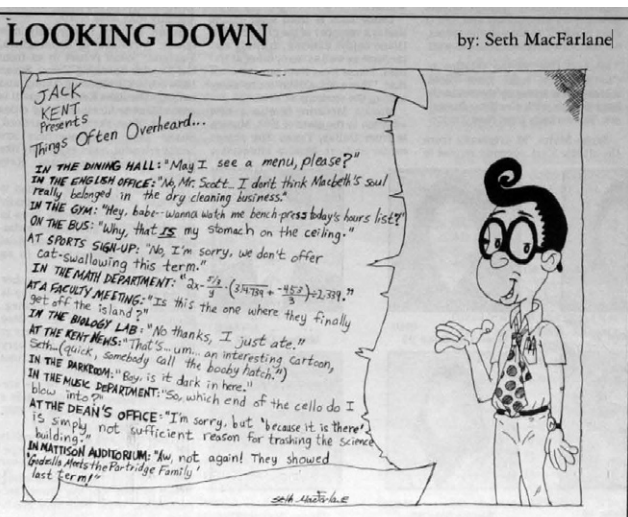
shock, but I think some of the things that are sacred cows in our culture, as they always have, lend themselves to satire, and that's what was going on there. But I did that, I think from age 9 up through the day I went off to college, and then that's when I stopped. But during that, at one point, I was doing cartoons for the local paper, which was the GTD, and then it eventually became the *Kent Weathervane* with Ed Rapp, and then I think went back to the GTD. It always amused me that a town that small had two papers. It's kind of amazing. At the same time, for those four years I was at Kent, I was doing the cartoons for the *Kent News*, and so it was a town and a school that was, from day one, incredibly supportive of what it was that I was doing and what I was trying to do. I never had one person say, "Listen, can't you have a backup plan and try and do something serious with your life as opposed to this nonsense?" It was just full-throated support across the board from day one, which tracks because it's a very artistic town, so they get it.

JANA: You touched on this a moment ago, but satire is getting closer to reality these days. Is it getting harder to do satire?

SETH: There's nothing you can satirize politically that's any weirder or more outlandish than reality, certainly over the past 10 years. Political satire is in a very strange place because anything you joke about now has probably happened. I don't think it's gotten harder in a larger sense. I occasionally hear comedians, cartoonists, or comedy writers talk about how difficult it is. "You can't joke about anything anymore." I don't find that at all. I think that's something that's maybe been a little more sensationalized than it needed to be. I've found that comedy's alive and well.

JANA: Tell me why creative education is important, not just to Kent, but in public schools, where it's often the first thing cut when budgets are tight.

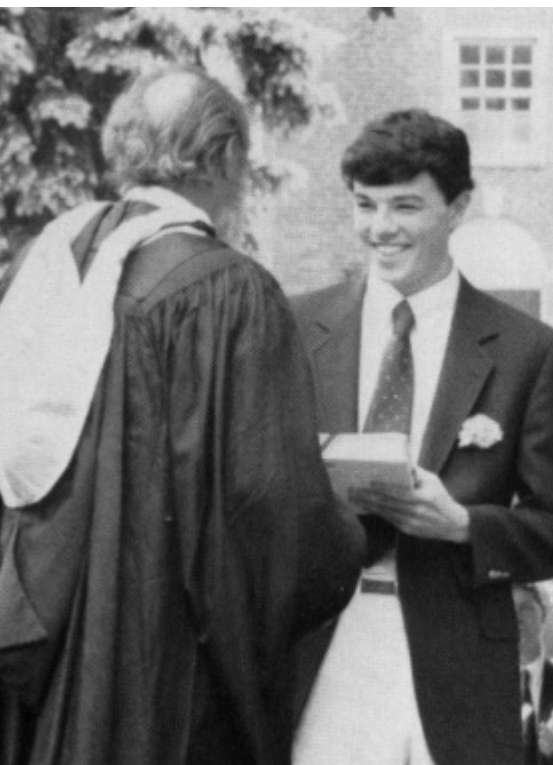
SETH: You do have to have a well-rounded pot of funding when it comes to that, because no one really knows at the end of the day exactly what they're going to wind up doing. One of the things that was great about RISD when I went to college was that they showed you everything. You picked your major, and in my case, it was animation, but they



Opposite page:
A young Seth MacFarlane
sketches cartoons

This page, left:
MacFarlane's "Looking Out"
cartoon, 1990

Opposite page, right:
MacFarlane's "Looking Down"
cartoon, 1991



This page, top:
Seth MacFarlane awarded the art
prize, 1991

This page, bottom:
MacFarlane draws a cartoon for
Kent News, 1990

Opposite page:
MacFarlane as a student at RISD



didn't train me in one style. They taught me about hand-drawn animation. They taught me about animation using mixed media. They taught me about cutout animation. They taught me about stop-motion, about claymation. They gave me every tool imaginable, and when I left, I was well-equipped to explore exactly what it was I wanted to do. I think the same thing applies to the funding you're talking about; you just have to allow for it all. There's no rational reason to slash funding for art and music any more than there is to slash funding for sports. You've got to have it all.

JANA: You've recently recorded an album of previously unrecorded Sinatra songs. Tell me about how exciting this opportunity was, and what is it about this throwback Sinatra/Great American Songbook style that makes you incorporate live orchestras into your other work?

SETH: I was raised on acoustic music. I came from a very musical family. It was very important to them that music be a part of our upbringing. I was in the church choir directed by Marty Holcomb at St. Andrews for a number of years, and it was always something that was encouraged. I was a big film score fan as a kid. I loved when John Williams or Jerry Goldsmith or Elmer Bernstein or James Horner or Alan Silvestri would release a new film score. It was always exciting and stimulating, and I took that with me into adulthood and made it a part of everything I've done. I think it's something that's underrated. I think if you're watching a show—and certainly many television shows no longer use a live orchestra—but when one does, even if the audience doesn't know consciously that what they're hearing is live music and that they're hearing air

in the room, it somehow on a visceral level makes the show feel a little more important; it matters just a little bit more.

JANA: You've won several Emmys. You've been nominated for multiple Grammys and an Oscar. What draws you to work in the mediums of TV, film, and music?

SETH: I was raised on so many different disciplines. Obviously, I was drawing cartoons from a young age. I was involved with a lot of local theater. I played the trombone at Kent. There were a lot of different artistic disciplines that were part of the equation, and I didn't want to give any one of them up when I came out here to work. I didn't want to pigeonhole myself. What's nice about working in animation is that it encompasses so many different disciplines. It's visual art, it's acting, it's writing, it's music. It allows you to keep all those muscles active and makes it so that no two days are the same.

JANA: Most aspiring creative people—writers, artists, musicians, animators, etc.—will not reach your level of success. Why is the creative process still worth pursuing?

SETH: You have to love it. I've never done this for the money or the success. I've done it because I love it. It's just hardwired into me, and it's all I know how to do. There really isn't any other reason. For the first couple of years of my career, I was working but not making a lot of money. But I loved what I was doing, even though buying food was a little bit of a stretch sometimes. I couldn't ever imagine myself doing anything else. Certainly, for me, and I think with everyone, it's a combination of hard work and luck. The luck factor is always underemphasized. It's timing. It's pitching the right show at



the right time. I was pitching "Family Guy" right around the time when everyone wanted animation and a lot of it, and that certainly had an enormous amount to do with where I eventually wound up.

JANA: How do you think the rise of AI will impact the animation industry? Is it all bad or could it open up any new opportunities?

SETH: I don't think it's all bad. Like anything, AI, if used as a tool that can make your job a little easier and can shorten your day and allow you to do

the same job working eight hours a day instead of 14—which so oftentimes is the case in film, it has to be at least considered. I don't think any of us are interested in seeing movies or reading books or scripts written entirely by AI at this point. The human connection between artists and audience is something I don't think will ever completely vanish. It's just too baked into our psyches. But you look at something like the evolution of the microphone. Sinatra recorded his earlier songs at Columbia with an RCA Ribbon mic, and

then when the Neumann 47 came out in the '50s, I believe, he started using that because it was a better microphone and his recordings sounded better. So, I liken it to that kind of situation. If it's a tool that can allow creative expression in a way that maybe wouldn't have been possible otherwise, you can look at it like CGI. There are things CGI can do now that we weren't able to do 40 years ago, and it's opened up venues of storytelling. There'd be no "Jurassic Park" without it. So again, like anything, I think as a tool, it will have great potential. We just have to be responsible with how we use it. I know that's the biggest cliché in the book, but it bears repeating.

JANA: Anything coming up soon that you're excited about?

SETH: Well, we have "The Naked Gun" reboot [starring Liam Neeson] coming out in about a month or so, which was written and directed by Akiva Schaffer. And from me directly, we have season two of "Ted" coming out soon on Peacock. Those are the two big ones for this year.

[Editor's Note: "The Naked Gun" was released in theaters on Aug. 1, 2025, and has received wide praise from critics and theatergoers. It is rated Certified Fresh on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer.]

JANA: What's the power of voice to you, whether in characters, in song, or as an advocate?

SETH: It's just something I was born with and it's, again, the luck of the draw. I was born with a useful set of pipes, so I use them. Really, it's as simple as that. You use the talents you're dealt, and there doesn't seem to be any reason not to.