

Comic. Genius

Dan Piraro brings veganism and progressive politics into the mainstream

Bizarro

And Other Strange Manifestations of the Art of Dan Piraro

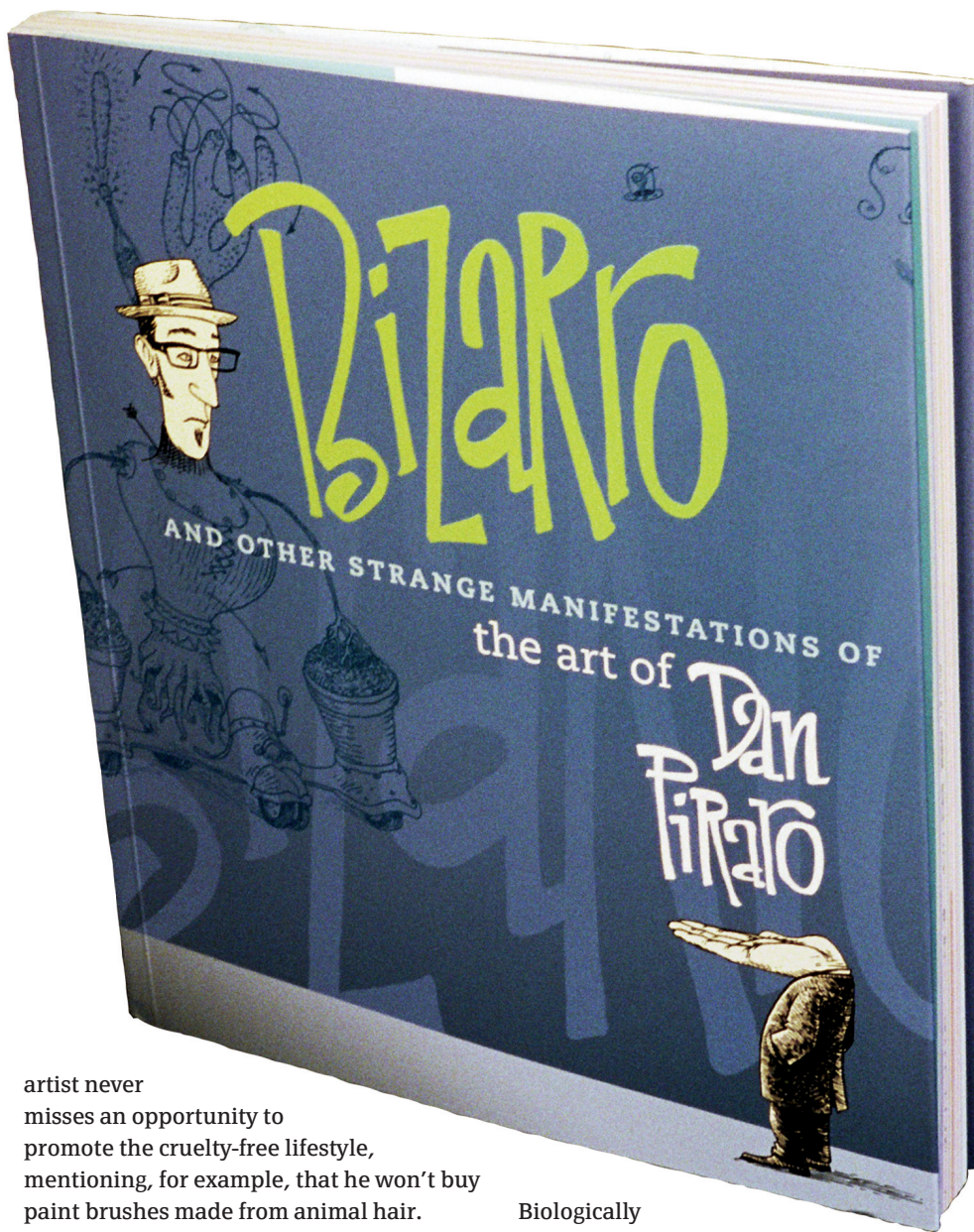
By Dan Piraro

Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
2006 • 200 pages • \$24.95

Review by Mark Hawthorne

POP QUIZ: NAME AN ARTIST WHOSE wildly popular daily cartoon frequently promotes veganism—and who is *not* Dan Piraro. Stumped? Well, that's because Piraro pretty much dominates the niche, being the veg community's most recognized comic voice. More than 200 newspapers syndicate his print cartoon, "Bizarro," which began two decades ago and routinely takes on such far-ranging topics as animal rights, religion, gay rights and politics. The surreal cartoon has spawned a number of equally surreal book-length collections, including the latest, *Bizarro and Other Strange Manifestations of the Art of Dan Piraro*.

But this new volume doesn't merely anthologize "Bizarro" cartoons. Accompanying the pages of comics, paintings, sketches and personal photographs, an extended autobiographical essay further reveals Piraro's unique brand of humor and offers a compelling indictment of agribusiness. The book chronicles Piraro's transformation, as he puts it, from "a creative misfit class clown in Oklahoma to a passionate animal-rights advocate in New York City." The author-



artist never misses an opportunity to promote the cruelty-free lifestyle, mentioning, for example, that he won't buy paint brushes made from animal hair.

Piraro proves himself an articulate, well-informed and clever activist. He writes: "Some argue that while we started as vegetarians, we have 'evolved' to eat meat.

Biologically speaking, we haven't changed at all in this regard. You might as well say we've evolved to smoke tobacco. We've been doing it for centuries and we

enjoy it, but we haven't developed a natural need for it, or a defense against its ill effects." You can bet I'll be keeping *that* analogy handy.

Among the biggest treats in Piraro's revolutionary cartoons are the richly detailed backgrounds and extra jokes for those with the time (and eyesight) to look closely. Regular "Bizarro" readers know Piraro hides symbols in his cartoons, such as spaceships, sticks of dynamite and pieces of pie. The lighthearted explanations of these objects on his website, bizarro.com, imply that he includes them mostly for fun. More seriously, animal rights messages punctuate his comics. A typical cartoon reproduced in *Bizarro and Other Strange Manifestations* depicts several men at a bar, one with a "no veal" button on his jacket and another sporting a "Farm Sanctuary" tattoo. Yet another cartoon shows Piraro and his wife Ashley walking past a vegan café. The kicker is, the themes in these particular cartoons aren't even animal rights. In this way, Piraro subversively ushers compassionate living into the mainstream.

This oversized paperback doesn't just cater to fans of comics and Piraro's work. It also makes a great coffee table book (even if you don't like coffee—or tables, for that matter). Who knows how many houseguests, unaware of the inhumane practices involved in factory farming, will peruse this hip, colorful book, get to laughing, and then realize the deeper truths within its pages.

Piraro could produce these books for some time. He writes: "People in my family tend to live well past life expectancy, no matter how badly they abuse their bodies, so I figure with regular exercise and my vegan diet, I should live well into the next century." Let's hope he's right.

MARK HAWTHORNE has nearly finished his first novel, which a neighbor gave him for Christmas in 1999.

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