PROLOGUE

When I was thirteen, four girlfriends of mine and I went to have our caricatures drawn. The artist was one of my friends’ big sister; she had gone to art school and was very skilful.

But if there’s one thing thirteen-year-olds aren’t so skilled at, it’s making fun of themselves, and I may have been especially challenged in this area. While I was sitting there, waiting to have my portrait drawn, I scrutinized the drawings of the others. They were both ugly and very easy to recognize, exactly what caricatures are supposed to be. I had myself a good laugh!

Then it was my turn. When my friend’s big sister revealed the drawing, everyone went wild with enthusiasm – the picture was spot on. ‘It really looks like you!’ I heard them say. ‘This is the best one!’ All I saw was a huge nose, a hideous overbite, no mouth, and a never-ending forehead. I wanted to throw away the drawing right away, but I had one last hope: My mother was working with art, so if I showed the drawing to her, I was sure she would quickly confirm what a pathetic piece of work it was.

That hope rapidly faded.

When my mother saw the caricature, she exclaimed, ‘Oh, Jorunn is so talented. What a shame that she didn’t continue her art studies!’

My humiliation was complete. The drawing was ugly, and everyone thought it was great.

I have tried to find it, but without any luck. My family is terrified of throwing away anything whatsoever, and I found some drawings from my teenage years in various closets and in the attic. Jorunn’s ‘brilliant’ caricature, however, is and remains lost.

The caricaturist’s foremost task is to take the most distinctive features and exaggerate them. But why is it called a ‘caricature’ at all? Etymology explains a lot. *Caricare* is an Italian verb derived from the Latin *carrus* (cart, wagon), meaning to load or to overload. The verb *to charge*, for example, has the same origin. Thus, caricatures are exaggerated or ‘overloaded’ images. If a caricature additionally tries to convey a message, such as criticizing powerful people or phenomena, it is more appropriate call it a satirical drawing. Satire is defined as ‘a way of criticizing people or ideas in a humorous way, especially in order to make a political point.‘

In Norwegian, *avistegning* (newspaper drawing) is a well-established term for cartoons in newspapers, currently the medium that publishes most drawings of this type in Norway. But for how long? Newspapers are in a major restructuring phase, and many Norwegian editorial departments have stated that cartoons do not work well online. They are not a good ‘fit’. Nonetheless, many readers promptly throw a fit about them, the most recent and foremost example being the Muhammad cartoons.

It is by no means radical Islamists alone who are ruffled by drawings, but an ever increasing number of groups find it expedient to fiercely protest individual drawings and cartoonists. As recently as 2019, the *New York Times* decided to eliminate satirical drawings from their international edition, and a clear tendency to put a stop to political cartoons can be gleaned among the world press in general. It simply becomes too difficult to maintain the appropriate context, and fear of massive retaliation is on the rise.

Unfortunately, it is not merely a claim but a fact that at the time of this writing (2021) the political cartoon has become an endangered art form. These days, anything that does not fit into a clearly defined category is quickly viewed with suspicion. That is exactly why I think it is so important for us to learn more about the tradition and social function of satire. Educate yourself! is a popular mantra of our time. When it comes to the art of satire, we may all be in need of some remedial education.

In this book, I will use ‘political cartoon‘ and ‘satirical drawing’ as key terms to describe today’s art form. But ‘caricature’ is an important term as well, considering that modern satire has sprung out of this type of portrait, which mainly aims for a purely humorous effect.

If someone is provoked, hurt or enraged by a cartoon, it usually means – quite ironically – that the cartoonist has done a good job. But cartoons are not good per se, of course. History furnishes a host of examples of how drawings have been used to incite racism, war and hatred, and the Nazis’ anti-Semitic propaganda represents an absolute low point. When an entire ethnic group is branded and associated with highly exaggerated and in some cases fabricated features, it is possible to spread visual hate propaganda with great efficiency and without having to use a single word.

The wordlessness of cartoons is their strength and at the same time their greatest danger: even if many drawings lack words, they always have a context. While our fully digitized world allows a cartoon to go viral around the globe in seconds, its context remains in the country of origin. This was the case with the Muhammad cartoons, which, as we shall see, were moreover actively distributed to Muslim countries by a small clique of imams who had their own agenda. On 7 January 2015, when the Kouachi brothers stormed the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing twelve people, they had been impacted by a decade of tactically demonizing cartoonists in radical Islamic circles.

It is impossible to reason with fanatics, but the spread of knowledge has a strong preventive effect against fanaticism. With this book I wish to contribute to a better understanding of and knowledge about satirical drawings. In our daily lives we are surrounded by powerful visual expressions and stratagems, but few books aimed at the general public have been published about the topic. This is my attempt to place cartoons into their historical context and at the same time show why this artistic genre is important today.

Writing a book about cartoons has been incredibly satisfying, and above all fun to do, something I hope will be reflected in the text. At least I can guarantee you drawings of the highest class. Thirteen-year-old Erle would hardly have imagined that twenty-five years later she’d be delving into the depths of such a lame art form, but luckily I’ve changed a lot since my teens. I haven’t exactly become a wizard at tolerating criticism, but at least I don’t rip apart drawings any longer!