The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

Ohio State Engineer

Title: The Engineer's Bookshelf

Creators: Dumble, Wilson R.

Issue Date: 1945-04

Publisher: Ohio State University, College of Engineering

Citation: Ohio State Engineer, vol. 28, no. 5 (April, 1945), 15-16.

URI: http://hdl.handle.net/1811/36157
If I am going to write about Jim Thurber and his recent anthology called *The Thurber Carnival*, I want to tell you what I think is his most celebrated drawing. I saw it first in *The New Yorker.*

This drawing shows a doctor's office with one of Thurber's curiously intent females confiding in what is evidently a great psychiatrist. The doctor remarks: “You said a moment ago, Mrs. Sprague, that everybody you look at seems to be a rabbit. Now just what do you mean by that, Mrs. Sprague?” Well, you've seen it no doubt. There is just one disquieting feature about this drawing. The specialist himself has the head of a rabbit. And I—I arose from a comfortable chair in order to look in a mirror: I wondered if I, too, had the head of a rabbit. Either I or Thurber, I thought, had gone completely mad. You know, there are some people who say that only a madman could think up the situations which Thurber does for the characters of his drawings and his stories. Others hold to the belief that Thurber is symbolic of that disturbing phenomenon, a completely logical man bewildered by and at grips with a completely illogical world. But maybe it is better not to have any theories about Thurber. Maybe it's better just to enjoy him.

There really is an enormous range of entertainment in *The Thurber Carnival*, a big new anthology of the writings and drawings of Jim Thurber. “This book,” the author tells you in his preface, “contains a selection of the stories and drawings the old boy did in his prime, a period which extended roughly from the year Lindbergh flew the Atlantic to the day coffee was rationed.”

*The Thurber Carnival* includes six stories hitherto unpublished in book form, stories from “My World and Welcome to It”; essays from “Let Your Mind Alone”, and “The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze”; all of “My Life and Hard Times”; some of his very wry “Fables for Our Time”; five of his celebrated illustrated poems, and a wide assortment of incredible drawings, including the entire epic of “The War Between Men and Women.”

One of the drawings in this book shows two of Thurber's mild little men having a duel. One of them has just severed the other's head from his body, and the caption reads, “Touche!” You probably recall it. This is one drawing for which Thurber did not think up the idea. It came into *The New Yorker* office, so we are told, from another artist; and while the editors liked the idea, it looked entirely too realistic and too gory. They held a conference and they decided to let Thur-
ber re-do it, because, after all, the way Thurber draws people, a man who has his head cut off can just put it on again, and well—go about his busi-
ness.

I suppose I do not need to tell you that Jim Thurber was born fifty years ago here in Colum-
bus, and that he is still very much in his prime. When he was six years old, his brother shot an
arrow into his left eye, destroying its sight, and in recent years Jim almost lost his other eye; but
he has never lost any part of his ability to laugh and to make people laugh with him. There is a
special oddity to his humor, and also a great deal of wisdom. And as Clifton Fadiman avers, he is
"that quite serious and often weighty thing—a true humorist."

If you do not know, you should know those fantas-
tic Thurber drawings; those huge, resigned
dogs; those determined and sometimes frighten-
ing women; those globular men who try so hard
to think so unsuccessfully. Someone once said that
the trouble with the Thurber women is that they
have no sex appeal. To which Marc Connelly
replied: "Oh yes, they have—for the Thurber
men." Psychiatrists have tried to analyze the
weird situations in which his picture characters
find themselves, on the basis of Thurber's alleged
complexes. But to this Thurber has a simple
explanation. "How did you ever think of put-
ting that woman on top of a bookcase," he was
asked. "Well," Thurber replied, "First, I put
her on top of a staircase. Then I discovered the
staircase looked more like a bookcase; so I put
books in it." Also, when Thurber was ques-
tioned as to what lay back of one of his most
curious creatures—a fish with ears—he explained
that originally he was drawing a dog, which does
have ears, but that when he looked at it closely
it seemed to have the face of a fish, so he turned
it into one.

Thurber was educated here on the campus at
Ohio State University, entering in 1913, but not
going his degree until 1919, because he took
one year off "just to read" and another to spend
in war service. Because of the accident to his
eye, he was refused by the Army, so he spent
part of 1917 and 1918 as a code clerk, first in the
Department of State in Washington, then in the
American Embassy in Paris. Following his gradu-
ation he worked as a reporter for The Columbus
Dispatch and then he spent some time working
When he returned to New York he began sending
contributions to The New Yorker, and later he
was made managing editor of that publication.
"I was about as adequately equipped for that job
as for dentistry," he comments. He had a very
simple way of handling his responsibilities there,
it is said. When he left the office in the evening,
he would take out of his pocket all the office
memoranda telling him what to do the next day,
tear them up, and drop them in the gutter. It is
a commentary on the rather casual methods of
the magazine that this worked fairly well for a
time. In the end, Thurber fired himself as an
editor and began to rewrite material for The
Talk of the Town section of the magazine, at
which task he was superb.

The stories about Thurber's office behavior are
manifold. It is said that when he is in a blue
mood he calls up The New Yorker and asks for
himself. When the switchboard operator tells
him he is out, he feels better. Also, once, in pro-
test against the editor's habit of trying to keep
doors locked, he had twenty duplicates of the
office master-key struck off, and he passed them
out among his friends.

Another story—this one vouched for by Wol-
cott Gibbs, the theatre critic for The New Yorker
—has to do with the time when the management
decided to get him a new typewriter, and he
ordered the most expensive machine he could find
to be sent up that afternoon and charged to the
company. He got it too, and so did several other
members of the staff who up till then had never
thought in terms of direct action.

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Dear Cousin Eph,

Your uncle has a job at last. The first time
in 48 years. We are rich. $17.50 every Thurs-
day. Sent to Sears & Roebuck for one of them
there new fangled bathrooms like you have,
Oughta see it!

Over on one side of the room is a big long
white thing, like the pigs drink out of, only you
can get in it and take a bath all over at once.
Over on the other side of the room is a little
white gadget on the wall called a sink. This is
for light splashing like hands and face. They
also sent us a roll of writing paper, but it is
kind of cheap, I think. It tears so easy.

But over in the corner now, they got a thing
where you can put one foot in and scrub it till
it's clean. Then you pull the chain and get fresh
water for the other foot. Queer world, ain't it?

Yours truly,

Cousin Eph.

P. S. Two lids came with the thing, and we
can't find no use for them, so Ma is using one
for a breadboard, and we framed Grampa's pic-
ture in the other.—Minnesota Technolog.