

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>

The Engineer's Bookshelf . . .

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

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The Thurber Carnival includes six stories hitherto unpublished in book form, stories from "My World and Welcome to It"; essays from "Let Your Mind Alone", and "The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze"; all of "My Life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 Thurber's most famous stories, and one which I think really deserves a place as a modern classic, is his "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." This is the story of a mild and

henpecked Connecticut husband, who, in between shopping chores and waiting for his wife to have her hair dressed, lives in a wonderful dream world of his own creation. First, he is Commander of a roaring Navy Hydroplane, riding his crew through a hurricane. Then he is a great surgeon performing a delicate operation that all the other specialists have declared impossible. Also he is a daring spy, unflinchingly facing the firing squad with a sneer upon his lips. In between such dramatic encounters, Walter Mitty is struggling to remember just what it was that his wife wanted him to buy. No, it couldn't be Kleenex, or toothpaste, or razor blades or bicarbonate. Then, suddenly it comes to him. "Puppy biscuit!" he exclaims. A woman who is passing laughs. "He said 'Puppy biscuit,'" she says to her companion. "He said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself." Incidentally, Thurber has discovered through many letters he has received that Walter Mitty has become a considerable hero to the men at the front; in some quarters he ranks in popularity with Superman.

There are several stories in *The Carnival* having to do with disagreements that arise between long-married husbands and wives. Yes, indeed, there was Mrs. Winship, for instance, who was simply wild about Greta Garbo. Mr. Winship liked Garbo, too, but his wife's enthusiasm inspired him to be contrary. "And who do you think is greater than Greta Garbo?" she demanded once, to which husband offhandedly replied, "Donald Duck." Not that it had ever occurred to him before. It was merely something to say. How the Donald Duck-Garbo controversy came to assume mighty proportions, with Mr. Winship packing his bags and moving to his club, and his wife bursting into tears and declaring she "couldn't live under the same roof" with any one who had so little appreciation of art, is told in Thurber's own bewildering manner.

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 business.

I suppose I do not need to tell you that Jim Thurber was born fifty years ago here in Columbus, 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 fantastic Thurber drawings; those huge, resigned dogs; those determined and sometimes frightening 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 putting 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 questioned 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 getting 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 graduation he worked as a reporter for *The Columbus Dispatch* and then he spent some time working on the Paris edition of *The Chicago Tribune*. 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 protest 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 Wolcott Gibbs, the theatre critic for *The New Yorker*—has to do with the time when the management declined 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.

Long Pine Creek, Tenn.

Dear Cousin,

Your uncle has a job at last. The first time in 48 years. We are rich. \$17.50 every Thursday. 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 picture in the other.—*Minnesota Technologist*.