

FUNNY BUSINESS

It's so hard to tell what might set people off anymore. I'm gay, so am spared charges of being heteronormative.

A woman approached me at the book signing table a few years back and said, "Question: Do you think you could maybe write *one single story* in which an animal isn't being tortured?"

(I hate it when people begin sentences with "Question:".)

"Did I mention a lot of animals being tortured tonight?" I asked a 70-year-old a few minutes later.

"Well," she said, and she thought for a moment. "There was that one mouse."

What really gets people going is race, which is almost impossible to talk about in America. If I have a black character in an essay who is any less virtuous than Morgan Freeman in every movie he's ever been in, the audience — the whites in the audience — retreat into their own heads and stay there, thinking, *If I laugh, does it make me a racist? What does it mean that I don't like this particular character?*

That said, I don't feel particularly stifled. I just do my thing.

PP: Would you say the American sense of humor is different from that of other countries, other cultures?

DS: A few years back, a group of Italian horn players adapted a number of my stories for the stage. It was all very madcap and physical — at one point a tuba acted as a toilet. I can't imagine that kind of broad, almost infantile theater working in, say, Greece or the U.S., but it killed in Turin. I see differences between the U.S. and the U.K. I think the British are better at wordplay than we are, more appreciative of it. I can't speak for France. My books come out there, but nobody buys them. The reviews are like, "What is this? A person wrote a story about their dentist, but why?" I've never understood the stereotype of the humorless German. I love doing shows there.

PP: What trends do you see in current American humor? Any you like? Any you don't?

DS: I like that our society has opened up. Cable TV and podcasting are giving more people a chance to be heard. As for trends, you're talking to someone who just yesterday noticed that people are wearing skinny jeans. And it's been, what, eight years now?

HUMORISTS ON HUMOR

CRACKING THE CODE ON WHAT CRACKS US UP

BY RICH WARREN

One of the most popular writers of his day, James Thurber was, to use his own words, a wit, satirist, and humorist. As he explained, "The wit makes fun of other persons; the satirist makes fun of the world; the humorist makes fun of himself." Named for him, the Thurber Prize for American Humor is awarded annually to recognize the art of humor writing; the 2017 winner will be announced at Caroline's Comedy Club in New York City on October 2, 2017. The *Post* invited previous prize winners and finalists to share thoughts on the art of being funny today.

What characterizes modern American humor?

"People talk about the perils of being politically correct, but in a way it's just the opposite. There's so much more you can say now than you could 30

years ago. Louis C.K.'s comedy routines are a case in point, but there are writers who push the envelope just as far. What used to be on the edge is now family humor."

—Calvin Trillin
Novelist, poet, food writer,
regular contributor to *The New Yorker*;
author of *Quite Enough of Calvin Trillin*

"I tend to write political satire. But I decided that American politics have reached the point of being sufficiently self-satirizing, so for my recent book, *The Relic Master*, I travel backward in time to the year 1517. And you know, I had such a good time doing it I may just stay in the 16th century. And while it's probably true that a lot of the comic/satirical energy has shifted to TV, there's still an awful lot of good stuff being written these days."

—Christopher Buckley
Novelist, essayist, critic, memoirist;
author of *No Way to Treat a First Lady*

"Humor is less filtered now than it used to be, it's darker, more inappropriate, but at the same time humor with heart reigns supreme. It's hard to characterize the humor scene today because it's so diverse. It's become a conduit for political issues, for social, class, and gender issues. Is it possible 'funny' is getting too 'serious'? People still want to laugh, but they also want a really good story to go along with it."

—Sloane Crosley
Essayist, novelist; author of
I Was Told There'd Be Cake

What qualities does good humor writing have, and can it be learned?

"Essentially, you take an essential truth and twist it, turn something upside down so it's seen in unexpected ways. That's the heart of it. Afterward, there are matters of timing and pacing, a rhythm you need to establish. Throw in some elements of storytelling. Build

up, push back, build the tension, and finally you hit the mark. I used to think humor couldn't possibly be learned, but now I absolutely believe it can."

—Laurie Notaro
Journalist, novelist; author of
The Idiot Girl and the Flaming Tantrum of Death

"I think you can analyze what makes good humor. And you can sum up techniques of how to make it work. But something like that would end up in the *Journal of Structural Engineering*. It would be that dull."

—John Kenney
Novelist, regular contributor to *The New Yorker*;
author of *Truth in Advertising*

Where does humor come from? Is there a humor impulse?

"I don't think it's a humor impulse. It's a story impulse. After the idea comes to you, you have to think what form it will work best in — a short piece, a novel, the theater, late-night TV show. I'm blessed that I've been able to work in all those forms, so I can decide which one works the best. Maybe next I'll try writing a pamphlet."

—Alan Zweibel
Screenwriter (*Saturday Night Live*), playwright,
novelist; author of *The Other Shulman*

Do you find humor comes out of your own experiences?

"Of course, although I had trouble finding anything funny about turning 80. At least I don't have to take my shoes off at the airport anymore."

—Calvin Trillin

Do you see any difference in the humor between men and women?

"I think men and women are equally funny, but because men's experiences are way different from women's, it makes for a difference in perspective. That makes us different but equal in a number of ways."

—Laurie Notaro

"Tina Fey and Lena Dunham have both written staggering, laugh-out-loud funny books. Many of the funniest people writing today are women."

—John Kenney



James Thurber

"I don't know how Thurber would do these days. His agent would probably tell him he needs to get a sitcom before he can shop his book around."

—DAN ZEVIN

Do the internet and social media have an impact on contemporary humor?

"I find a lot of cool, interesting voices on the internet that you won't find anywhere else. You can publish and reach an audience there that you can't anywhere else. That means that someone in Minnesota who works at a power company can publish short pieces of comedy that people anywhere in the world can find and laugh at. Through the internet, the sky's the limit as far as creativity."

—Steve Hely
Screenwriter (*30 Rock*, *The Office*);
Author of *How I Became a Famous Novelist*

Would you consider the humor on American television to be literary in its broadest sense?

"Only written humor, written by one person, published on paper, in a book or magazine, is literary humor. TV sitcom scripts, screenplays, blog posts, transcripts of stand-up routines

are all fine, but none come close to literary humor. Every so often, a work of literary humor lasts forever. A few pieces by Thurber fall in that category. Ditto S.J. Perelman and Robert Benchley. Roy Blount is a great literary humorist, as are Garrison Keillor and David Sedaris.

—Ian Frazier
Essayist, staff writer at *The New Yorker*;
author of *Lamentations of the Father*

"From a book-publishing perspective, I think humor writing is in great shape, just as long as you're a famous TV star. I don't know how Thurber would do these days. His agent would probably tell him he needs to get a sitcom before he can shop his book around town. Or at least he'd need an Instagram account. He'd probably be taking selfies with his dogs instead of drawing them."

—Dan Zevin
NPR contributor; author of *Dan Gets a Minivan: Life at the Intersection of Dude and Dad*