James Thurber

For the political scientist, see James A. Thurber.

James Grover Thurber (December 8, 1894 – November 2, 1961) was an American cartoonist, author, journalist, playwright, and celebrated wit. Thurber was best known for his cartoons and short stories, published mainly in The New Yorker magazine and collected in his numerous books. One of the most popular humorists of his time, Thurber celebrated the comic frustrations and eccentricities of ordinary people. In collaboration with his college friend, Elliott Nugent, he wrote the Broadway comedy, The Male Animal, later adapted into a film, which starred Henry Fonda and Olivia de Havilland.

1 Life

Thurber was born in Columbus, Ohio, to Charles L. Thurber and Mary Agnes “Mame” (née Fisher) Thurber on December 8, 1894. Both of his parents greatly influenced his work. His father, a sporadically employed clerk and minor politician who dreamed of being a lawyer or an actor, is said to have been the inspiration for the small, timid protagonist typical of many of his stories. Thurber described his mother as a “born comedian” and “one of the finest comic talents I think I have ever known.” She was a practical joker, on one occasion pretended to be crippled and attended a faith healer revival, only to jump up and proclaim herself healed.[1]

Thurber had two brothers, William and Robert. Once, while playing a game of William Tell, his brother shot James in the eye with an arrow, and Thurber lost that eye. This injury would later cause him to become almost entirely blind. Unable in his childhood to partake in sports and other activities because of his injury, he elaborated a creative mind which he then used to express himself in writings.[1] Neurologist V.S. Ramachandran suggests Thurber’s imagination may be partly explained by Charles Bonnet syndrome, a neurological condition that causes complex visual hallucinations in otherwise mentally healthy people who have suffered some level of visual loss.[2]

From 1913 to 1918, Thurber attended The Ohio State University, where he was a member of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity. He never graduated from the university because his poor eyesight prevented him from taking a mandatory ROTC course.[3] In 1995 he was posthumously awarded a degree.[4]

1.1 Move to New York

In 1925, Thurber moved to Greenwich Village in New York City, getting a job as a reporter for the New York Evening Post. He joined the staff of The New Yorker in 1927 as an editor, with the help of E.B. White, his friend and fellow New Yorker contributor. His career as a cartoonist began in 1930 after White found some of Thurber’s drawings in a trash can and submitted them for publication; White inked-in some of these earlier drawings to make them reproduce better for the magazine, and
years later expressed deep regret that he had done such a thing. Thurber contributed both his writings and his drawings to *The New Yorker* until the 1950s.

### 1.2 Marriage and family

Thurber was married twice. In 1922, Thurber married Althea Adams. The marriage was troubled and ended in divorce in May 1935.[11] They had a daughter Rosemary together, and lived in Fairfield County, Connecticut. He remarried in June 1935 to Helen Wismer (1902–1986).

### 1.3 Death

Thurber was stricken with a blood clot on the brain on October 4, 1961, and underwent emergency surgery. The operation was successful, but he died, aged 66, due to complications from pneumonia which set in. His last words, aside from the repeated word “God,” were “God bless... God damn”, according to his wife, Helen.[5]

### 2 Legacy and honors

- Established in 1997, the annual *Thurber Prize* honors outstanding examples of American humor.


- Two of his residences have been listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places: his childhood Thurber House in Ohio and the Sanford-Curtis-Thurber House in Fairfield County, Connecticut.

### 3 Career

Uniquely among major American literary figures, he became equally well known for his simple, surrealistic drawings and cartoons. Both his skills were helped along by the support of, and collaboration with, fellow *New Yorker* staff member E. B. White, who insisted that Thurber’s sketches could stand on their own as artistic expressions. Thurber drew six covers and numerous classic illustrations for *The New Yorker*.

#### 3.1 Writer

Many of his short stories are humorous fictional memoirs from his life, but he also wrote darker material, such as “The Whip-Poor-Will”, a story of madness and murder. His best-known short stories are “The Dog That Bit People” and “The Night the Bed Fell”; they can be found in *My Life and Hard Times*, which was his “break-out” book. Among his other classics are *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, *The Catbird Seat*, *A Couple of Hamburger*, *The Greatest Man in the World*, *If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox*, *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* has several short stories with a tense undercurrent of marital discord. The book was published the year of his divorce and remarriage. His 1941 story “You Could Look It Up”,[6] about a three-foot adult being brought in to take a walk in a baseball game, is said to have inspired Bill Veeck’s stunt with Eddie Gaedel with the St. Louis Browns in 1951. Veeck claimed an older provenance for the stunt, but was certainly aware of the Thurber story.[7]

In addition to his other fiction, Thurber wrote over seventy-five fables, some of which were first published in “The New Yorker” (1939), then collected in *Fables for Our Time & Famous Poems Illustrated* (1940) and *Further Fables for Our Time* (1956). These were short, featured anthropomorphic animals (e.g. *The Little Girl and the Wolf*, his version of *Little Red Riding Hood*) as main characters, and ended with a moral as a tagline. An exception to this format was his most famous fable, *The Unicorn in the Garden*, which featured an all-human cast except for the unicorn, which doesn’t speak. Thurber’s fables were satirical, and the morals served as punchlines as well as advice to the reader, demonstrating “the complexity of life by depicting the world as an uncertain, precarious place, where few reliable guidelines exist.”[8]

His stories also included several book-length fairy tales, such as *The White Deer* (1945), *The 13 Clocks* (1950) and *The Wonderful O* (1957). The latter was one of several of Thurber’s works illustrated by Marc Simont. Thurber’s prose for *The New Yorker* and other venues included numerous humorous essays. A favorite subject, especially toward the end of his life, was the English language. Pieces on this subject included “The Spreading ‘You Know’,” which decried the overuse of that pair of words in conversation, “The New Vocabularianism”, “What Do You Mean It Was Brilliant!”, and many others. His short pieces – whether stories, essays or something in between – were referred to as “casuals” by Thurber and the staff of *The New Yorker*.[9]

Thurber wrote a biographical memoir about the founder/publisher of *The New Yorker*, Harold Ross, entitled *The Years with Ross* (1958). He wrote a five-part *New Yorker* series, between 1947 and 1948, examining in depth the radio soap opera phenomenon, based on near-constant listening and researching over the same period. Leaving nearly no element of these programs unexamined, including their writers, producers, sponsors, performers, and listeners alike, Thurber republished the series in his anthology, *The Beast in Me and Other Animals* (1948), under the section title “Soapland.” The series was one of the first to examine such a pop-culture phenomenon in depth. Thurber’s wit made it more than a sober piece of what would later be called investigative reporting.
3.2 Cartoonist

While Thurber drew his cartoons in the usual fashion in the 1920s and 1930s, his failing eyesight later required changes. He drew them on very large sheets of paper using a thick black crayon (or on black paper using white chalk, from which they were photographed and the colors reversed for publication). Regardless of method, his cartoons became as noted as his writings; they possessed an eerie, wobbly feel that seems to mirror his idiosyncratic view on life. He once wrote that people said it looked like he drew them under water. Dorothy Parker, contemporary and friend of Thurber, referred to his cartoons as having the “semblance of unbaked cookies”. The last drawing Thurber completed was a self-portrait in yellow crayon on black paper, which was featured as the cover of the July 9, 1951, issue of Time. The same drawing was used for the dust jacket of The Thurber Album (1952).

3.3 Adaptations

- Thurber teamed with college schoolmate (and actor/director) Elliott Nugent to write The Male Animal, a comic drama that became a major Broadway hit in 1939. The play was adapted as a film by the same name in 1942, starring Henry Fonda, Olivia de Havilland and Jack Carson.

- In 1947 his short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty", was loosely adapted as a film by the same name. Thurber intensely disliked the film, which he felt had little relation to his story. Danny Kaye played the title character.

- In 1951 United Productions of America announced an animated feature to be based on Thurber's work, titled Men, Women and Dogs. The only part of the ambitious project that was eventually released was the UPA cartoon The Unicorn in the Garden (1953).

- In 1960, Thurber fulfilled a long-standing desire to be on the professional stage and played himself in 88 performances of the revue A Thurber Carnival (which echoes the title of his 1945 book, The Thurber Carnival). It was based on a selection of Thurber's stories and cartoon captions. Thurber appeared in the sketch “File and Forget”. The sketch consists of Thurber dictating a series of letters in a vain attempt to keep one of his publishers from sending him books he did not order, and the escalating confusion of the replies. Thurber won a special Tony Award for the adapted script of the Carnival.


- In 1969-70, a full series based on Thurber's writings and life, entitled My World and Welcome to It, was broadcast on NBC. It starred William Windom as the Thurber figure. Featuring animated portions in addition to live actors, the show won a 1970 Emmy Award as the year’s best comedy series. Windom won an Emmy as well. He went on to perform Thurber material in a one-man stage show.

- In 1972 another film adaptation, The War Between Men and Women, starring Jack Lemmon, concludes with an animated version of Thurber's classic anti-war work “The Last Flower”.

- In 2013, a new adaptation of The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, starring Ben Stiller as the title character, not the least similar to the Danny Kaye earlier version of 1947.

4 Popular culture

- Beginning during his own father’s terminal illness, television broadcaster Keith Olbermann read excerpts from Thurber’s short stories during the closing segment of his MSNBC program Countdown with Keith Olbermann on Fridays, which he called “Fridays with Thurber.”

- On an episode of Norm Macdonald’s video podcast, Norm Macdonald Live, Norm tells a story in which comedian Larry Miller admits that his biggest influence in comedy was Thurber.

5 Bibliography

5.1 Books


- The Owl in the Attic and Other Perplexities, 1931

- The Seal in the Bedroom and Other Predicaments, 1932


- The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze, 1935
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5.2 Children’s books

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The Great Quillow, (children) 1944

The White Deer, (children) 1945

The 13 Clocks, (children) 1950

The Wonderful O, (children) 1957

5.3 Posthumous books

Credos and Curios, 1962 (ed. Helen W. Thurber)

Thurber & Company, 1966 (ed. Helen W. Thurber)


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People Have More Fun Than Anybody: A Centennial Celebration of Drawings and Writings by James Thurber, 1994 (ed. Michael J. Rosen)


The Dog Department: James Thurber on Hounds, Scotties, and Talking Poodles, 2001 (ed. Michael J. Rosen)


5.4 Short stories

This list is incomplete; you can help by expanding it.

“The Man Who Hated Moonbaum”

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"

"The Night the Bed Fell"

"The Unicorn in the Garden"

"The Moth and the Star"

"The Rabbits Who Caused All the Trouble"

“"The Macbeth Murder Mystery”, 1937 (printed in The New Yorker)

“"You Could Look It Up”, 1941

"The Catbird Seat”, 1942

“"The Secret Life of James Thurber”, 1943

“"The Breaking up of the Winships", 1945

"A Couple of Hamburger"

“"The Greatest Man in the World”

“"The Cane in the Corridor”

“"If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox”

“"The Bear Who Let It Alone”

"The Princess and the Tin Box"

"The Dog that Bit People"

“"The Lady on 142”
• “The Remarkable Case of Mr. Bruhl”
• “The Scotty Who Knew Too Much”
• “The Night the Ghost Got In”
• “The Car We Had to Push”
• “The Day the Dam Broke”
• “More Alarms at Night”
• “A Sequence of Servants”
• “University Days”
• “Draft Board Nights”
• “The Wood Duck”
• “The Owl Who was God”
• “File and Forget”[16]
• “The Whip-Poor-Will”
• “Mr. Preble Gets Rid of His Wife”

6 See also

• The Battle of the Sexes (1959 film) based on “The Catbird Seat”
• Walter Mitty, expression

7 References


8 Further reading

8.1 Biographies of Thurber


8.2 Literature review


9 External links

• The Paris Review Interview
• The Thurber House website
• “Thurber’s World (and Welcome To it)” by Bill Ervolino, The Record (Bergen County, NJ), December 17, 1995
• Pathfinder: James Grover Thurber – Thurber links portal
• *The Last Flower* – ballet after an idea by James Thurber; 1975

• Origins of “the Thurber Dog”

• James Thurber Biography, *Encyclopedia of World Biography*

• *New Yorker* magazine digital archive—Abstracts of 1,758 Thurber short stories, poems, cartoons and commentaries
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