

April 2012
New Series, 21:1



"Humor is a serious thing. I like to think of it as one of our greatest earliest natural resources, which must be preserved at all cost."

-James Thurber



OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN HUMOR STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Sponsored by: Department of English, Saint Louis University Graphic Design: Timmy Nelson Editor: Laurie Britt-Smith

Notes and News

Plans are underway for the next AHSAMTCA quadrennial conference which will be in New Orleans in December of 2014. If all goes well we will be returning to the Monteleone Hotel in the French Quarter.

Don't forget that AHSAM has a live Wiki that is just waiting for whatever collaborative input members of AHSAM would like to add. Suggested ideas include posting syllabi for humor courses, creating specialized bibliographies to aid in research projects, providing a place of common access for sound files of humor pieces that require they be read in dialect to be fully appreciated, and posting unpublished conference proceedings. The format is flexible and is only limited by our creativity as a community. Join us at www.americanhumor.pbworks.com

If you are working on a research project, have a humor blog you would like us to know about, or come across something that would be of interest to members of AHSAM, put it on the wiki – but also send it along to the editor. Lbritt@udmercy.edu. Content ideas and other commentary for *To Wit* is always welcome.

AHSA at American Literature Association 2012 23rd Annual Conference San Francisco, CA May 24-27

10-B: American Mass Culture: Humor, Satire, Gender, Politics
Chair: Joe Alvarez
"How Disney Founded the Corporate Welfare State; or, Never Trust a Humorous Homily" Gregg Camfield, University of California, Merced
"Cartooning Strong-Willed Women in Antebellum America" Teresa Prados-Torreira, Columbia College, Chicago
"It's only brains that count": Wit and the Slippery Semiotics of Intellect in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" Abby Goode, Rice University

16-E: Theorizing Humor and Wit: New Directions

Chair: Gregg Camfield, University of California, Merced
"American Humor: General Theory and Inconvenient Truth" Daniel Royot, Universite de Paris, Sorbonne
"Humor as a Category of Cultural Analysis" Tracy Wuster, University of Texas, Austin
"American Humor Studies as Twenty-First Century American Cultural Studies: A Manifesto." Judith Yaross Lee, Ohio University

11-M Business meeting: Friday 2:10-3:30

Special Session:

Session 14-C **Mad About Mad: Humor, Satire, and Culture in Mad Magazine**

Organized by: John Bird, Winthrop University
Chair: Judith Yaross Lee, Ohio University
"Dave Berg: Chronicling American Dystopia," Joseph A. Alvarez, Independent Scholar
"Joseph Orlando: His Mad Encounters," Jules A. Hojnowski, Independent Scholar
"Sing Along With Alfred: Humor, Satire, and Culture in the Music of Mad," John Bird, Winthrop University

Organized by the Mark Twain Circle of America

Session 19-E **Mark Twain: Exploration and Conflict**

Chair: John Bird, Winthrop University
"Mark Twain's Autobiographical Dictations and William James's Concept of 'The Stream of Thought,'" Patrick K. Dooley, U. S. Air Force Academy
"Twain's War in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*," Beverly A. Hume, Indiana University-Purdue University
"A far-off speck that looked like daylight': McDougal's Cave and the Vagaries of Discovery in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*," Erin Sweeney, University of California, Irvine

Session 20-C Finding Mark Twain

Chair: Linda Morris, University of California, Davis
"A Digital Palimpsest Mapping Project (DPMP or 'Deep Map') on 'Global Huck,'" Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Stanford University
"Huck Finn in China," Selina Lai, University of Hong Kong
"Mark Twain Meets the 'Irish Brigade,' Follows them to Lake Tahoe," Robert E. Stewart, Independent Scholar

Organized by the Mark Twain Circle of America and the Henry James Society:

Session 17-D Getting Real: Henry James and Mark Twain

Chairs: James S. Leonard, The Citadel; John Carlos Rowe, University of Southern California

"Marginal James," Michael Anesko, Pennsylvania State University.

"A Possible Biographical Connection between Mark Twain and Stephen Crane," Paul Sorrentino, Virginia Tech

"The Duality of the American Derived Identity Through the Narrative Lens of Henry James and Mark Twain," Jocelyn Chadwick, Harvard University

Other Conferences and Organizations of Interest:

The 2012 International Society for Humor Studies Conference

will be held from June 25 to June 29, 2012, Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland. Jagiellonian University. Information about this and other upcoming conferences and the ISHS can be found at www.hnu.edu/ishs

The **Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor** is holding their 25th annual conference April 19-22, 2012 at The Western O'Hare in Chicago this year. Their theme this year is "Beat the Blues with Humor."

AATH welcomes anyone who is interested in learning more about the application and benefits of therapeutic humor. It was created to educate health care, business, and education professionals about the values and therapeutic uses of humor and laughter, and to promote conduct, and identify the need for research that further investigates the roles humor and laughter play in well-being. AATH also has a Humor Academy Program that serves as a "dynamic resource for the AATH community interested in the theory, rational, and scientific research of therapeutic humor and in the applications of therapeutic humor in occupationally diverse fields." Information on AATH and the HA programs can be found at www.aath.org. Questions about the Humor Academy can be sent directly to Mary Kay Morrison marykay@questforhumor.com or you can contact the AATH office at 888-747-AATH (2284).

The **Humor Project** is holding its 55th annual conference, The Positive Power of Humor and Creativity, June 1-3, 2012 at the Silver Bay Conference Center in Silver Bay, New York. This year's conference will honor Allen Funt and Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. For more information visit the Humor Project at www.humorproject.com



Corner Conversation

Overhead at the ALA in Boston was a rather interesting discussion about the Kennedy Center awarding the 2011 Mark Twain Prize for American Humor to Mr. Will Ferrell. The general consensus was although Mr. Ferrell is a talented comedic actor and writer; it is a bit too soon for such an honor. One suggestion was that the award not be given every year if they are going to grant it to people who are still in the prime of their careers. The crux of the debate was who else has been given the award. It is a very impressive list:

Richard Pryor – 1998 "I feel great about accepting this prize. It is nice to be regarded on par with a great white man – now that's funny! Seriously, though, two things people throughout history have had in common are hatred and humor. I am proud that, like Mark Twain, I have been able to use humor to lessen people's hatred!"

Jonathan Winters – 1999

Carl Reiner – 2000

Whoopi Goldberg – 2001

Bob Newhart – 2002

Lily Tomlin – 2003

Lorne Michaels – 2004 (The Canadian Mark Twain?)

Steve Martin – 2005 "I believe entertainment can aspire to art, and can become art, but if you set out to make art you are an idiot."

Neil Simon – 2006

Billy Crystal – 2007

George Carlin – 2008

Bill Cosby – 2009

Tina Fey - 2010

According to The Kennedy Center website, "The Mark Twain Prize recognizes people who have had an impact on American society in ways similar to the distinguished 19th century novelist and essayist best known as Mark Twain . . . Samuel Clemens was a fearless observer of society, who startled many while delighting and informing many more with his uncompromising perspective of social injustice and personal folly. He revealed the great truth of humor when he said 'against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.'"

So the question is do you think Ferrell was deserving of this honor at this point in his career? What about Ms. Fey? Have a comment about the other prize winners? Who would you like to see nominated and why? Share your thoughts on the AHSA wiki: www.americanhumor.pbworks.com
Let's keep the conversation going.

Information about the Mark Twain award and its recipients can be found at www.kennedy-center.org/programs/specialevents/marktwain/

HBO Comedy Special

Mel Brooks and Dick Cavett: Together Again. (Available on HBO GO www.hbo.com/comedy) Filmed in front of a live audience, this hour-long special re-unites these legends for a rambling showcase of Brooks live wire mind (at one point he claims to be slowing down with age – if this is slow, what was he like before?) and Cavett's ability with the quick retort and easy-going conversational style that keeps the discussion moving and

somehow on track. Special guest, Carl Reiner, is among the audience members. At one point he is asked to stand and help retell the genesis of their classic “2000 year old man” routine. Of course the two fall into the well-oiled delivery of the material: Reiner: “Of all your wives, in all those years, who was your favorite?” Brooks: “Shirley.” Reiner: “Why, what was so wonderful about Shirley?” Brooks: “Her friend, Lila.”

Cavett and Brooks trade many show business memories featuring legendary icons like Katherine Hepburn and Alfred Hitchcock including this one by Brooks about George Burns. The two were eating in the NBC Commissary when Jack Benny walked by in full Indian get-up including a ridiculously elaborate head-dress. As he approached the table, Burns asked in his trademark deadpan, “Hi Jack. Working?” Although many of the stories and jokes have been oft told, it’s still a delight to watch these masters at work, and will hopefully serve as a revelation for a new generation of fans.

Popular Entertainment Resource

Looking for a snapshot of contemporary comedic personalities, writers, and producers? Check out *Entertainment Weekly* #1179, Nov 4, 2011. AKA “The Comedy Issue”. (Available online at <http://www.ew.com/ew/inside/archive>). The issue crowns Melissa McCarthy (*Bridesmaids*, *Mike and Molly*) the new queen of comedy. The cover article includes fun portraits of her as The Queen of England, The Queen of Hearts, and the late, great drag queen, Divine, and also takes a rather serious look at her career and issues facing women trying to break into comedy.

Additionally, the edition features a package of in-the-moment names in comedy sharing about their careers and offering small insights into humor. Although this section is slick and features mostly short blurbs, it has a few gems like English stand-up, actor, and writer Ricky Gervais’ answer to the questions, “What’s the difference between English and American humor?” Answer: “Not a lot” which leads to a tidy defense of the American sense of irony, which many Brits claim doesn’t exist. Pointing to programs like *The Simpsons* and *The Larry Sanders Show* as evidence that it does, he states that the biggest difference in sensibilities is that “American’s don’t live ironically all day.” Something the British can’t seem to wrap their heads around. Perhaps the most valuable article for humor studies researchers is “The Art of Comedy” where the writers and creators of different formats, from action comedy movies, to viral videos and podcasts get their moment of reflection. Because of audience considerations, the magazine cannot allow for in-depth conversations, but they, like the rest of this edition, provide a good introduction to key ideas in comedy writing as applied to popular and digitally mediated entertainment.

Pocket Book Reviews

By Kalman Goldstein

Cernea, Ruth Friedman, editor. *The Great Latke-Hamantash Debate*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006. 220 pages. ISBN 13: 978-0-226-10024-1. Softcover. \$12.00.

Every November since 1959, noted academics, Nobel laureates, and college presidents have been invited to the University of Chicago to sing the praises, compare the merits, or celebrate the impact of Chanukah latkes and Purim hamantashen upon world culture through poetry, essays, burlesque, jokes, and horrible puns. Some dress in costume; all gleefully parody the intense reasoning, deductive rigor, arcane terminology, and implausible

conclusions native to their disciplines. Every panel has included one non-Jewish scholar, even though the earliest “debaters” were intensely biblical, even Talmudic.

Over time, they would argue that such delicacies have shaped American history and literature, the Renaissance, Shakespeare, French linguistics, bioethics, ancient Chinese writings, hermeneutics, Marcel Proust, rock music lyrics, and even atomic physics. Some more digressive essayists included Darwin’s “Voyage of the Bagel” and the gestalt of heartburn. In one notable exchange, a Marxist sociologist confronted a feminist anthropologist over mouthfuls of meaning. This volume anthologizes some of the most creative or outrageous of examples, by such unlikely jesters as Milton Friedman, Allan Bloom, Barbara Stafford, Sol Tax, and Harold Shapiro.

Editor Ruth Cernea is an anthropologist, former director of the campus International Center; Ted Cohen, Professor of Philosophy and 25-year moderator at the festivities, provides both an introduction and his parody of Boethius’ “Consolations”. The nine “rounds” comprising this collection are arranged in no obvious order (chronological or disciplinary) but offer the editor opportunities to pun on their titles. Appended to each section are “noshes,” shorter comments by participants. A seven-page list of contributors illustrates that the “debates” have drawn in faculty nationally; Cernea mentions that some other schools have adopted the forum. She includes a Glossary of Yiddish and Hebrew terms, although these seem increasingly unnecessary for appreciation of the humor. And yes, there are recipes!

Eggers, Dave, editor. *The Best American Non-Required Reading 2011*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2011. 500 pages. ISBN: 978-0-547-57743-2. Soft cover. \$14.95.

Working with Eggers, a group of high school students in San Francisco and Ann Arbor were asked to pore through magazine essays, short stories and Internet sites, all published in 2010, to discuss, debate, and help assemble this collection. How the students were selected is not clear, but the volume shows that motivated American teenagers still like to read! It also reveals their taste in contemporary humorous literature.

The first section of some 50 pages consists of miscellaneous lists worthy of a late-night television routine: strange names of communes, rock bands and WiFi networks, and ludicrous lawsuits. There are also poems satirizing Arizona’s anti-“illegals” law, and examples of ‘gonzo’ journalism. The larger, second section, compiles short stories and essays, some of which are either harrowing or monitory, but over half of which are humorous, ranging from social comedy, to satire, slapstick, or surrealism. Among the better-known authors represented are Joyce Carol Oates (“A Hole in the Head”) and Neil Gaiman (“Orange”), whose selections are satiric and edgy. But there are also contributions by Sloane Crosley, “Le Paris,” situational humor laden with witty one-liners; a wacky “Butt and Bhatti” by Mohammed Hanifi; the wickedly absurd “We Show What We Have Learned” by Clare Beams, and J. Robert Lennon’s “Weber’s Head”, a surreal sitcom. An otherwise serious piece, “Second Lives” by Daniel Alarcon, has a Mexican boy living in Alabama teach Hispanic curse words to Anglo kids. Included as well are examples of more gentle or rueful humor. Both the editor, and Guillermo del Toro’s introduction, set the tone with tongue-in-cheek comments.

Reflective of today’s Facebook culture, those students who comprised the creative committees are photographed as well as described “yearbook” style. One wore a paper bag over his head.



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American Humor Studies Association New and Renewal Membership Application

Membership in the American Humor Studies Association includes the semi-annual newsletter, *To Wit*, and the annual journal, *Studies in American Humor*, on an as-issued basis.

To join, send a \$25 check (\$30 for international; \$10 for student) to:

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Enroll / Renew me as a member in the American Humor Studies Association, please.

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