



"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

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### From the Editor

Greetings and Happy Autumn! As the seasons change, reminding us that what is new becomes old, and what is old eventually becomes new again, this issue of "To Wit" follows suit by offering items new, familiar, and reborn.

The new is a feature I'm not-so-creatively calling "Author's Note", a space for those actively working on or just publishing a piece of major scholarship to share about their project or something of interest about the topic. (Just send me a 500 words or less write up and I'll get your note into an upcoming issue.) I am happy to shine the inaugural spotlight on my colleague Gregory Sumner who has a forthcoming book on Kurt Vonnegut.

The familiar is a report from the May 2011 ALA and CFPs for upcoming conferences, along with the other usual content. The reborn is a bit of fun from the past. Cameron Nickels and his infamous "Ducks in a Row" has been resurrected. It's a feature a lot of folks mentioned as something they miss, and it is my pleasure to allow Cameron the chance to occasionally get his ducks back together.

It is my hope that this newsletter continues to help build this community, and unfortunately, sometimes we lose a member. As most of you probably know by now, Dr. Michael Kiskis died suddenly of heart failure in May of 2011. It is an honor to provide a space to reflect and remember his work and, more importantly, his personhood.

Best to you all, Laurie Britt-Smith

Send comments or potential content to [Lbrittsm@udmercy.edu](mailto:Lbrittsm@udmercy.edu)

### Report from the Annual Conference on American Literature

The AHSa held two sessions, "Humoring Genre" and "Satire and Reflexivity", at the 22<sup>nd</sup> ALA held in Boston, May 26-29, 2011. The presentations were insightful, thought provoking and included the use of small Rocky and Bullwinkle stuffed animals given voice by esteemed colleague, John Bird.

That particular bit of fun occurred during the "Humoring Genre" session as we were reminded of the multiple layers of genre at work in the humor of *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. In

addition to demonstrating the complex cultural, political, and genre knowledge at play in Jay Ward's creation, Bird also made a convincing case as to the importance and somewhat subversive nature of the show in shaping the worldview of its young viewers. In Frostbite Falls, authority figures can be safely mocked, and the political danger and intrigue of the cold war is reduced to failed attempts to get "moose and squirrel." Connecting quite well to the humor of Jay Ward, Joe Alvarez presented on the legacy of satire lyricist, Tom Lehrer. Lehrer, who penned such ditties as "The Vatican Rag" and "Killing Pigeons in the Park", was part of the satirical revolution of the early 60s and remains an influential figure, even if he is reluctant to claim his work as having much importance. The morning session ended with a presentation by Bruce Michelson on the literary wit of poet Richard Wilber, who at 90 is producing beautiful poetry that, going against the grain of contemporary movements that place more value on blank verse, can be scanned and moves easily from contemplations on the loss of his wife to the inherent humor of "owning" a housecat.

The afternoon session, "Satire and Reflexivity", featured laughter and a bit of profanity, along with detailed analysis of three very different satirical styles and genres. Victoria Bryan discussed the use of humor to find and reflect on hard truths in Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* and David Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Laurie Britt-Smith followed that with a discussion of a twisted sort of comedic trinity, Don Novello (aka Father Guido Sarducci), George Carlin, and Bill Maher, and their use of satire to target the priesthood and Catholic Church. Jan McIntire-Strasburg ended the session by turning the focus to film, discussing the humor and multiple levels of satire operating in the horror film *Scream* and its ever more self-referential sequels.

The business meeting was well attended. Introductions were made between new members and old stalwarts, and a general overview of membership and finances was given. Plans were discussed about the location for the next AHSa/Mark Twain Circle quadrennial conference as well as updates on ongoing and new projects for the association (see next page for details on two of them). Overall there were plenty of good conversations, both formal and not, and we are looking forward to meeting again in Seattle and San Francisco in 2012.

## Ducks in a Row



By Cameron Nickels

I pussy-footed (as my father used to say) around this subject in the introduction to two books, and it's now time to take the guilty bull by the horns head on. With all due respect (as they said on *The Sopranos* before somebody got whacked), E. B. White was dead wrong when he wrote "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." True, analogy is not an element of style, but he should have known that "proof by analogy is a fraud" (as Bjarne Stroustrup said): analyzing is not dissecting, and humor is not a frog.

The problem for humor scholars is that people who are not take great joy in resurrecting the dead frog, challenging us to laugh, or chuckle guiltily at the very least. (That we don't have a sense of humor is a duck to line up at another time.) We are supposed to explain ourselves, to apologize humbly for analyzing the stuff, maybe find alternative work chopping up frogs. The following is true: in a dissertation on comic ephemera I was reading the week before writing this, the writer apologized in the first paragraph.

Thusly, I move that we write into the bylaws of the American Humor Studies Association (assuming we have some): "Apologize No More!"

The fact is that everybody "analyzes" humor; they have to in order to "get it" – a joke, a cartoon, a sitcom, a movie. When we analyze humor, it's not so much to say "Isn't that funny?!" as to say how or why it might have been to people at the time. It may well not be funny to us (racist, sexist), but we are seriously interested in why it was to them, giving some insight into American culture at that time: It's our window, our angle of vision.

Dissecting a frog kills it; analyzing humor gives it life.

### Announcing the AHSA Wiki [www.americanhumor.pbworks.com](http://www.americanhumor.pbworks.com)

We have a live Wiki that is just waiting for whatever collaborative input members of AHSA 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. Don't be shy; join the page and wiki to your heart's content.

### American Humor Studies Research Symposium

Proposed winter retreat at the Red Lion Inn - Stockbridge Mass.

The AHSA is considering throwing a "For Publication" mini-conference at the Red Lion Inn. (Mark Twain Circle members are also welcome.) Located in the beautiful Berkshires, The Red Lion is the grand-daddy of New England Inns, but with gorgeous updated rooms and an outdoor all-year round hot-tub.

The conference would be **February 9-11, 2012**. Participants would have a role on the program as chair/responder or presenter. The object of this gathering is to help advance publication plans for books and articles by listening to ideas and receiving advice from other scholars. Presenters could bring questions, pages, chapters, or anything else and receive professional feedback.

Sessions would be held from 9 to noon to allow for skiing and wintering in the Berkshires. Room rates would be around \$159

plus tax for rooms that usually go in the high \$200-350 range. Registration \$25.

People who are interested or willing to commit to attending should please email **Dave Sloane** at [dsloane@newhaven.edu](mailto:dsloane@newhaven.edu) at once so we can tell if we have enough positive interest to go to stage 2 planning. Dave thanks everyone for their consideration and support of this new idea for furthering research in humor studies, and hopes to hear from you soon.

### AHSA at MLA

The AHSA will be represented at the 127th MLA Annual Convention to be held January 5-8, 2012 in Seattle, Washington.

177. "Satire's Double-Edged Irony: Self-Satire and the Control of the Satirical Object" Presiding: Sharon D. McCoy, Univ. of Georgia

1. "The National Joker' and the 'Stealing Back and Forth of Symbols," Todd Nathan Thompson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
2. "The Cubies' ABC and the Modernist Debt to Antimodernist Satire," Eric Rettberg, University of Virginia
3. "Marianne Moore's Empathetic Satires," Rachel V. Trousdale, Agnes Scott College

### CFP: Modern Language Association Annual Convention Boston, 3-6 January 2013

"Laughing to Keep from Crying"

The American Humor Studies Association invites papers addressing the complex relationship between pain and humor. Theoretical submissions are encouraged so long as they are thoroughly grounded in primary texts or performances.

Some possible questions to explore: How does humor function in regard to the painful topic? Does finding humor in a painful situation confer any sort of responsibility on the part of the humorist? Is it possible to go too far, and how do we draw those lines? Does laughter generated in this way make us part of a community of shared experience or mark our distance from it? Is it an act of hopelessness or aggression or a defense mechanism against these? Do we, as a Robert Heinlein character once asserted, "laugh . . . because it's the only thing that will make it stop hurting?" Or is this a naïve perspective? Does explaining the joke, or delineating the pain behind it, spoil the joke, or make it more powerful? Are there productive ways to avoid binaries when thinking about pain and humor?

250-500 word abstract by **15 March 2012** to Sharon D. McCoy [sdmccoy@uga.edu](mailto:sdmccoy@uga.edu) or [sdmccoy@bellsouth.net](mailto:sdmccoy@bellsouth.net)

### CFP: American Literature Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA, May 24-27, 2012

The AHSA hopes to sponsor two sessions at the 2012 national meeting. We seek cogent, provocative, well-researched papers on the following subjects:

"Humor, comedy, wit: what can these words mean now?" Proposals are encouraged which seek to refresh and clarify fundamental terminology in humor studies, or to shed light on the recent history of those terms.

"Humor as American Cultural Practice" Proposals are encouraged that illustrate how the history of comic discourses can and should figure into broader constructions of literary, political, and cultural history.

E-mail abstracts (300 words or less) no later than **December 30, 2011** to Bruce Michelson ([brucem@illinois.edu](mailto:brucem@illinois.edu)) with the subject line: "**AHSA session, 2012 ALA**". Notifications will go out no later than January 20, 2012.

## Author's Note

KURT VONNEGUT, HEARTLAND HUMORIST

By Gregory Sumner

*Humorists are very commonly the youngest children in their families. When I was the littlest kid at our supper table, there was only one way I could get anybody's attention, and that was to be funny. I had to specialize. I used to listen to radio comedians very intently, so I could learn how to make jokes.*

This is how Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), arguably America's most iconic humorist since World War II, recalled the genesis of his gift for comedy. Growing up in Indianapolis young Kurt Jr. learned the strategy of being funny as a way to connect with people, and to soften the blows of life's tragedies, like the economic catastrophe that caused his parents to lose most of their money in the 1930s. Laughing was as easy as crying, Vonnegut came to understand, it used the same muscles, and, as he often said, there was "less cleaning up to do afterward."

Even in his darkest moment—huddled with other American POWs in 1945, in an underground hog-barn as the German city of Dresden was being firebombed—a well-timed, deadpan remark could provide distance on the situation, some space to breathe, to feel human again. "I wonder how the little people are doing tonight," Vonnegut recalled a fellow prisoner commenting in the darkness as the footsteps of giants rumbled above them, provoking grim laughter all around. Gallows humor was always available, an expression of defiance in an absurd world.

As many commentators have noted, Vonnegut's comic reflexes were of a peculiarly sardonic, middle-American variety, and parallels are often drawn to his predecessor and hero Samuel Clemens, another boy from the provinces who made good as a writer and moved east. Beyond the physical resemblance, both men were fascinated by technology; both were critics of abuses of power, concentrations of wealth, racism and imperialism. Both were skeptics in a society steeped in Christian religiosity. And, at the end of their lives, both despaired about the future of American democracy and the fate awaiting their grandchildren. Twain and Vonnegut challenged the sacred cows of their times with studied, relentless mockery, and faced catcalls and censorship pressures for their trouble. (The response from know-nothing critics continues, as evidenced by recent efforts to remove *Slaughterhouse-Five* from a school library in Twain's home state of Missouri, in a town ironically named "Republic.")

Kurt Vonnegut humbly embraced the comparisons, naming his first child Mark and acknowledging in his books, interviews and road show performances the debt we all owe to the father of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. In 1979, in a speech at Twain's Connecticut house on the centenary of its completion, Vonnegut celebrated his hero as America's indispensable mythmaker. "Only a genius could have misrepresented our speech and our wittiness and our common sense and our common decency so handsomely to ourselves and the outside world," he declared with unabashed admiration. Where would our culture be, Vonnegut was asking his audience, without the subversive humanity of Mark Twain?

We know, or should know, that practical jokers always come back to haunt, even after they have left the stage. As a special privilege in honor of his talk at Twain's mansion, Vonnegut recalled in *Palm Sunday*, balls had been neatly racked on the third-floor pool table, and he was invited to break them with the original owner's cue. The offer was wisely declined.

"I did not dare give Mark Twain's ghost the opportunity to tell me, by sending the cue ball into a corner pocket without touching

anything, what it thought of me." Belly-laughs echoed throughout the old Victorian house - music to the ears of a born comedian.

*Gregory Sumner is the author of Unstuck in Time: A Journey through Kurt Vonnegut's Life and Novels, to be published by Seven Stories Press in November. Visit sevenstories.com for details.*

## In Memoriam, Michael J. Kiskis 1955-2011

The sad news of Michael Kiskis' sudden passing was shared first by electronic notification, but formally at the ALA conference in Boston, on May 26, 2011. Ann Ryan, a close colleague of Kiskis, spoke in his place on the program, sharing what he was working on when he died and how it fit into the body of his life's work on Mark Twain. She also distributed copies of *Quarry Farm Papers* (2001), which features Kiskis' article, "Samuel Clemens and Me: Class, Mothers, and the Trauma of Loss." An excellent choice, as the piece illustrates much about Kiskis as a writer, scholar, and person. Michael Kiskis was cherished as a colleague and friend and his loss is deeply felt. The following is taken from his obituary, also provided by Ryan:

Michael J. Kiskis, Leonard Tydings Grant Professor of American Literature, renowned Mark Twain scholar, and long-time member of the Elmira College faculty died on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011 in Binghamton, New York after suffering heart failure. He was 56 years old.

Kiskis was born in Amsterdam, New York, the only child of Stanley Kiskis and Francis Jaracz. Professor Kiskis credited his mother's devotion and hard work for his own success later in life. Of his mother, he wrote that she had a "simple statement of principle: you learn and use that learning to make your way. And you pay back, and make sure that others make their way." After receiving his BA and MA degrees for St. Bonaventure University, Kiskis earned his doctorate at the State University of New York at Albany, where he began his life-long study of Mark Twain.

Dr. Kiskis' knowledge of American literature was as wide as it was deep, yet his reading of Mark Twain focused upon a consistent theme: the domestic life of Samuel Clemens. Dr. Kiskis located the source of Twain's literary genius within Twain's experiences as a father, a husband and a friend. In his writing and in his teaching, Professor Kiskis revealed Twain in his full humanity: noble and flawed, playful and profound, haunted by loss and fueled by his imagination. In this regard, the intellectual interests of Michael Kiskis mirrored his own personal values. Unimpressed by titles, wealth, or reputation, Kiskis cared foremost about the human condition, which he found documented as movingly in the letters of 19<sup>th</sup> century working Americans as in the writings of great artists.

Professor Kiskis was one of the foremost authorities on the autobiographical writings of Mark Twain. He published dozens of articles and edited and co-authored several volumes on Twain's life and his works including *Mark Twain's Own Autobiography: Chapters from the North American Review* and *Constructing Mark Twain: New Directions in Scholarship*. He was both President and a founding member of The Mark Twain Circle of America, and was on the editorial board of *The Mark Twain Annual*. He also served as President of the American Humor Studies Association and editor of *Studies in American Humor*. He received a Charlie Award for his service to the AHSA in 1999.

Michael J. Kiskis lives on through his wife, Ann Cady, his greyhound Joy and his beloved friends, students, and colleagues. Those wishing to memorialize Kiskis can make donations to The Michael J. Kiskis Memorial Fund to benefit the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies, One Park Place, Elmira, New York, 14901.



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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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