

October 2014  
New Series, 23:2



"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

*American Humor Studies Association  
Mark Twain Circle of America  
Quadrennial Conference 2014  
December 4-7, 2014  
Four Points Sheraton French Quarter*

Below is all of the information you should need to register at the hotel and pay conference fees. If you need anything further to help you plan, please email Jan McIntire-Strasburg at [mcintire@slu.edu](mailto:mcintire@slu.edu).

For making reservations at the Four Points Sheraton French Quarter, participants may make their individual reservations using the link below or by calling their central reservations line at **888.627.7596**. Please reference the "**AHSAMTC Quadrennial Conference**" in order to receive the group rate.

Guests can access the site to learn more about the event and to book, modify, or cancel a reservation from **September 3, 2014 to November 5, 2014**.

<https://www.starwoodmeeting.com/Book/AHSAMTC>

The Conference fee is \$80.00 for faculty and \$50.00 for graduate students. You can send checks to Jennifer Hughes at Averett University:

Dr. Jennifer Hughes  
Averett University  
420 W. Main  
Danville, VA 24541

Or, bring your conference fee with you and register when you arrive. If you are planning to register on arrival, please do not bring cash, as we will not be able to make change.

### A Sneak Peek at the Conference Program

Directors Janice McIntire-Strasburg and Ann Ryan have joined the collective brilliance of ASHA and the MTCA to present a varied, intellectual, and entertaining conference. With 14 panels and faculty, graduate, and undergraduate student representatives from 28 universities as well as several independent scholars, the conversations promise to be informative and spirited.

Panel topics include:

- The work of the Coen brothers and a reflection of our favorite little tramp - Chaplin at 100.
- Mark Twain and the language of power.
- Why we are still mad about MAD Magazine.
- Stand-up comedy in all its subversive glory – Politics, class, ethnicity, and gendered performances.
- Mark Twain and the crafting of Nature Writing.
- Genres of humor writing.
- Historical perspectives of humor writing from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and why it still matters.
- Humor and New Media
- Picturing Twain – how visual representations of the author (re)formed his persona.

Looking forward to seeing you in the Big Easy!

### Announcing:

#### **THE 2<sup>nd</sup> JACK ROSENBALM PRIZE FOR SCHOLARSHIP IN AMERICAN HUMOR**

Awarded to the best article on American humor by a pre-tenure scholar, graduate student, adjunct professor, or independent scholar published in (or accepted for publication in) a peer-reviewed academic journal or book. Articles published in 2014 and 2015 are eligible for the next award.

Articles will be judged by blind peer review by a committee of three scholars appointed by the AHSAMTC Board. Applicants do not need to be members of the AHSAMTC to submit. For details about the prize and entry information, please visit [americanhumor.org](http://americanhumor.org)

If you are interested in reviewing books for **Studies in American Humor** or if you have a book you would like us to consider for review, please contact Tracy Wuster at: [wustert@gmail.com](mailto:wustert@gmail.com)

**ASHA at the 130<sup>th</sup> Annual MLA 2015  
January 8-11, Vancouver**

ASHA will be represented Saturday, January 10 by the following:  
*Comic Dimensions and Varieties of Risk*  
Presiding: Janice E. McIntire-Strasburg, Saint Louis Univ.

"Humor and the Holocaust: Reconsidering the Reader's Role in Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews*," Jennifer M. Santos, Grand Canyon Univ.

"Playing with Humor in the Risk-Saturated Era of Islamophobia: Comedic Commentary in Zarqa Nawaz's *Little Mosque on the Prairie*," Roberta Wolfson, Univ. of California, Santa Barbara

"Risks and Raptures: The Highwire Comedy of Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*," John Wharton Lowe, Univ. of Georgia  
Abstracts at: [americanhumorstudiesassociation.wordpress.com](http://americanhumorstudiesassociation.wordpress.com).

**Panel by the Mark Twain Circle of America**

Vulnerable Twain

Friday, 9 January, 8:30–9:45 a.m.

Presiding: Sari Altschuler, Univ. of South Florida

"Twain's Vulnerability in the Pacific," Molly Ball, Univ. of California, Davis

"Po' Little 'Lizabeth!': Vulnerability, Disability, and Race in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," George Gordon-Smith, Emory Univ.

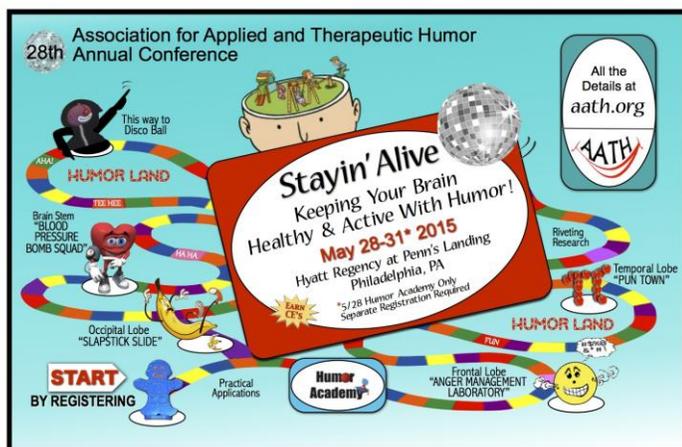
"The Vulnerability of Readers in Twain," Christopher D. Morris, Norwich Univ.

**Other Conferences and Organizations of Interest:**

**The 2015 International Society for Humor Studies Conference**

The 27th ISHS Conference will be held at the Society's home base, Holy Names University in Oakland, California from June 29 to July 3, 2015. Registration for the 2015 conference will open on November 15, 2014. Information about this and other upcoming conferences and the ISHS can be found at [www.hnu.edu/ishs](http://www.hnu.edu/ishs).

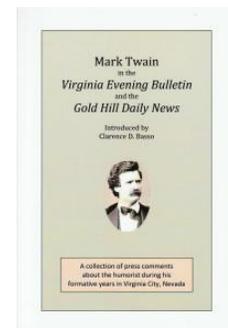
**Join us for the 28<sup>th</sup> Annual AATH Conference!**



**Projects of Interest to our Readers**

**Mark Twain in the Virginia Evening Bulletin and Gold Hill Daily News.**

Edited by Clarence D. Basso (2013, 48 pages).



Buried in the files of two newspapers that were contemporary with Twain's twenty-month tenure on the Virginia City, Nevada, *Territorial Enterprise* (September 1862-May 1864) are over seventy heretofore uncollected references to Twain.

These "locals", or gossip pieces, are the focus of a recently released collection. They form a window into Twain's role of news maker as opposed to his more celebrated roles of reporter, humorist, and purveyor of hoaxes. So prominent had he become at this early point in his career that the competing press of the Comstock capitalized on the celebrity of the *Enterprise's* hot property.

Read more on <http://nevadan.wordpress.com>. Review copies are available.

**Outstanding Blog Alert!**

**Humor in America** <http://humorinamerica.wordpress.com/>

"Humor in America" (HA!) is a blog dedicated to the discussion of humor and humor studies in America. This excellent collection includes topics on all things humor in America from an ongoing essay about the joker that was Edgar Allen Poe, to Bill Murray, to discussions about the work/life divide, and poetry and interviews (including one with our featured author, Beck Krefling). For social media devotees, they also have a running Twitter feed and you can "like" HA! on facebook.

There is also a wonderful multi-part article (2 parts so far, will be looking for the next installment) by Jeffery Melton on the anatomy of telling a joke. This begins with a photo of a cow that didn't quite clear a fence, and includes light bulb jokes (it makes sense in context – trust me) including this little gem:

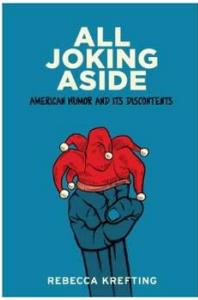
How many existentialists does it take to change a light bulb?

Two. One to change the light bulb and one to observe how the light bulb symbolizes an incandescent beacon of subjectivity in a netherworld of Cosmic Nothingness.

The blog was founded in January 2011 and is managed by our own Tracy Wuster. The site is easily navigated and contains links to several other sites, blogs, and listserves that may be of interest to humor scholars.

**Lecture Help**

Don and Aileen Nielsen offer a running list of lecture notes and powerpoint presentations for those teaching courses in humor studies and language/literacy studies. The growing list of topics is quite impressive and includes presentations on character types in multiple mediums, theories of language and word play, visual representations of body language, humor in film and television, humor of gender, politics, ethnicities, religions, and just about any other socially relevant topic you can think of as you plan a course or individual lecture. This wonderful treasure trove can be found at: <http://www.public.asu.edu/~dnilsen/>



### Author's Note

Rebecca Krefting Cuts the Cord and Delivers: **All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents**.

By Beck Krefting

"Why do women wear makeup and perfume? Because they're ugly and they smell bad." — Craig Anton (comic)

I'm pretty tired of these jokes. It makes women the butt of the joke in a mean-spirited way. There are thousands of them out there circulating online, on television, and in live comedy performances. Jokes don't have to be this way—antagonistic and tacit justification for maintaining beliefs about Others' inferiority. Among other things, this book grapples with our consumptive proclivities when it comes to stand-up comedy and how this determines popular comedy styles during different eras. Seeing what kinds of jokes proliferate gives us information about social values and treatment, ideologies, and national identity.

My main preoccupation consists of developing and charting a comedic genre: charged humor, or humor that intentionally unmasks social inequality. Charged humor is a social justice oriented comedy that aims to create community using shared experiences of occlusion, misrepresentation, stigmatization, and oppression as the basis for identification. It runs counter to, indeed asserts itself as response to and critique of, Anton's joke and others like it. Charged humor spills from the lips of contemporary comics like: Chris Rock, Margaret Cho, Kate Clinton, Dave Chappelle, George Lopez, Patton Oswalt, Maz Jobrani, Maria Bamford and many more. The book includes a compendium of over a hundred comics performing charged humor over the past sixty years, and is chock full of jokes that stimulate synaptic firing *and* tickle your funny bone.

When I explain charged humor to people, they immediately know what I'm talking about; we just haven't had a shared term to identify the humor with this kind of activist agenda. That we name it is important, but just as important is what it says about us as a society when this kind of humor doesn't sell or is not easily mainstreamed, especially because this was not always the case. During the mid-twentieth century audiences welcomed political and charged humor, but its popularity waned in the mid-1980s. While the 21<sup>st</sup> century ushered in new technologies like the internet and social media that could facilitate the widespread consumption of charged humor, we have yet to see an upswing in popular demand.

The book explores the economy of charged humor. If charged humor isn't as economically viable as a comedy style, than what kinds of comedy are? The answer to that question sparks many more. For instance, why is it so funny when straight comics act "gay" or when a non-Asian comic dons an Asian accent? Why is there still such a significant gender gap in the profession of stand-up comedy? And why does everyone love Dane Cook? The answers say much about whose identities are marketable and under what circumstances.

Along the way you will meet three comic performers committed to performing charged humor: Robin Tyler, a Jewish lesbian comic and activist and the first person to perform openly queer material on national television; Dr. Micia Mosely, a Black lesbian whose stand-up comedy and incendiary one-woman show, *Where My Girls At? A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians* (2008-present) can't seem to gain traction beyond festivals and colleges; and Hari

Kondabolu, a Southeast Indian American stand-up comic who sits at the precipice of stardom, though has yet to drink from those waters. The diversity of research participants assembled address issues of gender, race/ethnicity, religion, age, class, ability and sexuality, all categories of identity around which groups have historically rallied in order to secure visibility and civil liberties.

**All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) puts comedy, comics, and the audience under the microscope without killing the comedy or using impenetrable prose. The best praise for the book recently came from a friend of mine, an African American singer who opened for Richard Pryor in the 1980s and still performs along the Eastern Shore. After reading the book—a couple chapters a day as we vacationed together in New Hampshire—she turned to me and said: "It gave me words for what I was thinking all along." Boom.

About the Author: Beck Krefting, formerly a stand-up comic, is currently an Assistant Professor in the American Studies Department at Skidmore College. Peep at her here: [http://www.skidmore.edu/american\\_studies/faculty/rebecca-krefting.php](http://www.skidmore.edu/american_studies/faculty/rebecca-krefting.php) and (please!) follow her on Twitter @beckrefting #1KFollowersby2015

### Pocket Book Reviews

By Kalman Goldstein

McGraw, Peter and Joel Warner. **The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny**. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2014. 240 pages. ISBN 978-1-4516-6541-3; as e-book: ISBN 978-1-4516-6543-7. Hard cover. \$26.00.

The book opens with a warning from E. B. White about dissecting humor as if it were frogs; the authors' response: "Let's kill some frogs!" And kill frogs they do! The authors travel through several countries as well as the U.S., not predominantly to compare different national styles, but rather, they insist that such diverse performances all illustrate their definition of humor. There have been many theories of humor argued since Aristotle's time: superiority, tension relief, incongruity, repetitive futility, therapy, and assault. But building upon work by linguistics professor Thomas Veatch (University of Pennsylvania), psychologists McGraw and Caleb Warren (University of Colorado) have run many experiments as well as culled papers in *Humor: the International Journal of Research* to define and document their own: "benign violation". Journalist Joel Warner summarizes recent research, and also contributes accounts of the authors' comic travails. These anecdotes leaven what otherwise could become stuffily didactic. (One of the experiments studied how many times a joke or cartoon needs be repeated before participants find it unfunny.)

"Benign violation" theory is predicated upon behavior that, while in violation of moral principles, may still be considered "normal," and therefore humorous. Among many examples cited are stories of a grandfather's erection, cancer victims with an "un-poppable" pimple, and of lepers playing "pull my finger"! McGraw has diagramed them, using overlapping circles which stud the book, and finally inserted them into a stand-up routine. They even included what a British psychologist had declared "the world's funniest joke" (pace Monty Python), as blandly homicidal and thus compatible with their theory. However, through interviews with Robert Mankoff of *The New Yorker*, and Todd Hanson of *The Onion*, they discuss humor less visceral, but which still fit in: "too close for comfort, but too distant to matter."



Saint Louis University  
Department of English  
3800 Lindell  
St. Louis, MO 63108

## Mirth Masters of the American Humor Studies Association

### Executive Director

Janice McIntire-Strasburg  
Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO  
[mcintire@slu.edu](mailto:mcintire@slu.edu)

### President/Web Master

Tracy Wuster  
Independent Scholar  
[wustert@gmail.com](mailto:wustert@gmail.com)

### Vice President

TBD

### Secretary - Treasurer

Jennifer Hughes  
Averett University  
Danville, VA 24541  
[jahughes@Averett.edu](mailto:jahughes@Averett.edu)

### Editor- *Studies in American Humor*

Judith Yaross Lee  
Ohio University  
Athens, OH 45701  
[leeJ@ohio.edu](mailto:leeJ@ohio.edu)

### Editor- *To Wit*

Laurie Britt-Smith  
University of Detroit Mercy  
Detroit, MI 48221  
[lbrittsm@udmercy.edu](mailto:lbrittsm@udmercy.edu)

## 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:

Dr. Jennifer Hughes  
Averett University  
420 W. Main  
Danville, VA 24541h

Or

Join electronically via [Americanhumor.org](http://Americanhumor.org)

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

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