

A Subtreasury of AMERICAN HUMOR

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EDITORS

TUDOR PUBLISHING CO.
NEW YORK 1945

A SUBTREASURY OF AMERICAN HUMOR

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Tudor Edition 1945

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
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The following selections were first printed in *The New Yorker* and "to the best of our knowledge" have not been published since in book form except in a few cases in *New Yorker* anthologies. The editors and publishers are grateful to both the magazine and the authors and artists for allowing them to be used in this volume: Nine selections from "The Talk of the Town"; "Memoirs of a Master"—M. R. A.; "La Presse Perverse"—Robert Benchley; drawing of Henry Luce—Will Cotton; "Woman Out of Taxi"—Angela Cypher (Marjorie Allen Seiffert); two book reviews—Clifton Fadiman; "Limericks Long After Lear"—Morris Bishop and Richard Taylor; two theater reviews and "Shakespeare, Here's Your Hat"—Wolcott Gibbs; "Boy Meets Bullfinch" and "Mother Taft's Chickens"—Geoffrey Hellman; "Dr. C-dm-n's Daily"—Nunnally Johnson; "At Home with the Pa-leys"—E. J. Kahn Jr.; "Who Is This King of Glory?"—A. J. Liebling and St. Clair McKelway; "What Did You Do, Grandfather?"—Richard Lockridge; "An Affix for Birds"—St. Clair McKelway; "Atheist Hit by Truck"—John McNulty; "Inflexible Logic"—Russell Maloney; "The Downfall of Fascism in Black Ankle County"—Joseph Mitchell; "Savage Homecoming"—Clifford Orr; "The Mesecks"—Kenneth Allan Robinson; "Christopher K*a*p*I*a*n"—Leonard Q. Ross (Leo C. Rosten); "A Ride With Ralph"—Francis Steegmuller; "A Garland of Ibids" and "The Jukes Family"—Frank Sullivan; illustrations for "Fables for Our Time"—James Thurber; "Owl Man"—Sanderson Vanderbilt; "Fpafm"—Frances Warfield; "Famous Baths and Bathers"—Carolyn Wells.

PREFACE

A COLLECTION, whether of birds' eggs or of funny pieces, is likely to reveal more about the collector than about the subject. I know this to be true, because there was a cabinet of birds' eggs in the attic of the house I lived in as a child, and although I learned very little about birds from this early and fascinating anthology, I caught quite a glimpse of the cousin who had assembled all those eggs under one roof. They were arranged according to a plan which struck me as admirable: they were placed according to size—starting with an ostrich egg and ending with a hummingbird's. I'm sure that even at that date there must have been a more scientific way of grouping birds' eggs, but there was no lovelier. It was a memorable collection. The cousin died in a gun accident before I ever encountered him in the flesh, the only anthologist with whose taste I have been in complete agreement. There was not one egg that was not a perfect work of art.

In this collection of American humor, Katharine S. White (who shall hereafter be known as my wife) and I have tried to select some things we like ourselves, and have made no attempt to throw in anything to please anybody else. This is a subtreasury designed for the safekeeping of our own valuables. Anyone else who wants to pay his way in is at liberty to wander about, criticizing the contents of the vaults and looking for trouble. That is part of your money's worth. There are some well-known pieces in here, and some that are not well known, and two or three old chestnuts for roasting over an open fire these crisp fall nights. One thing you may *not* find in here is your favorite humorist, and we strongly advise you not to look for him, poor fellow. We passed him on the street the other day and he seemed far from well.

However, there is a little more to this book (we hope) than pure prejudice, and there is a little more to it than may be suggested by so sudden a mobilization of funny stuff, as though an emergency had arisen in humor. We have looked up some authors whose works were not familiar to us, and we have gone to some trouble to arrange things sensibly, according to their nature. (I would have arranged them ac-

cording to size, remembering the ostrich egg, if there hadn't been a steadier hand to lead me.) Parodists are here lined up, with their victims, under the same chapter heading. Story tellers are bunched, and moralists, and critics, and so on. I think you will find this a convenience, and possibly even interesting.

In one sense, any deliberate compilation of reading matter is a dubious project for anyone in his right mind to undertake, and some anthologies I have seen have reminded me strongly of the shell collections of ladies who have just come in from their first day on a Florida beach—a lot of broken-down pectens and some damaged sea worms. This anthology should be more resourceful and prettier than that, if only because our period of collection has been a long one and we have conscientiously discarded many specimens that turned out to be defective or that grew dull after they had lain around.

It will be apparent immediately that the book contains only humor which is, so to speak, “literary”—that is, it has been written down on paper, in words, to be read. The only drawings are drawings which are inseparable from the text. There are no jokes, as such, in the book. There is no unconscious humor, as far as we know. Vast fields of American humor are here untouched—the radio gag, the anecdote, the newsbreak, the after-dinner speech, the pun, the epigram, the humor that ripples in the subway and explodes in the ball park, the quip, the crack, the nifty, the wow, the wonderful stuff that the stenographer with her pad upon her knee tosses to the stockroom boy coming in with a fresh supply of paper clips, the humor of Mickey and Pluto, of blackface minstrels, of newspaper comic strips, of Benny Goodman playing Bach, the coinage of Winchell, the pantomime of Chaplin, the red curls of Harpo, the vast unwritten satires of Ed Wynn and Ethel Merman and Ray Bolger and W. C. Fields and the rest. There is nothing that can be done about them in a book. The melodious and collaborative humor of Merman-Porter is not distributable through the ordinary channels of book publishing, short of a pop-up containing a concealed Victrola. No subtreasury of American humor is complete today without a scene from *Of Thee I Sing* and the night-club parody from *Pal Joey*, but you simply can't present them without all those girls. I never realized how confining a book could be till we got going on this one.

We had our fair share of disillusionment in assembling it. It seemed like a gay idea, to begin with, but it soon began to ride us hard and

we developed some nasty saddle sores before we got through. There was quite a period when we entertained the notion that we would include what we fondly called "newspaper humor." We were going to collect a lot of terribly funny stories from the press. We collected them, all right, and some of them were funny, too, but we soon had to keep them in a separate icebox on account of the way the cream was beginning to taste. Old newspaper stories have an odor all their own; they are extremely hard to run down, and after you find them, you wish you hadn't. Something has happened to them in the meantime. Ask any newspaperman to name a funny story that he has written or that he has read, and he will direct you to within about three months of a certain issue of a certain newspaper (except it wasn't the *Times* it was the *Tribune*), and at last you discover the exact date and the very paper and you coax the library into letting you examine this immortal yet crumbling relic, this sere and yellow specimen, and as it trickles into your lap, particle by particle, you read with glassy eyes and set jaw the howlingly funny news story of long ago. It is a bad moment.

This is not said in disparagement of the humor of the press, or of reporters, plenty of whom are first-class humorists and are daily performing a brilliant feat in gathering news and transmitting it somewhat humorously. It simply means that even the perfect newspaper story, by the most expert and gifted reporter, dies like a snake with the setting of the sun. The news goes out of it (though some humor may remain), and when the news goes out of it the heart goes out of it. It doesn't bear reprinting except in a textbook, and this is not a textbook.*

So we ended by deleting from the "Reporters at Work" section of our book all the daily stuff, leaving only the magazine stuff, including a few pieces from "The Talk of the Town" in *The New Yorker*. In a way this seems unjust: the best reporting (including the best humorous reporting) is to be found in newspapers, not in magazines; but an anthologist has to take material which can go into type a second time with some effect, regardless of how good or even distinguished it may have been in its first appearance. The "Talk of the Town" pieces, although they had grown whiskers as timely articles do, stood up a little better, we found, than the daily paper pieces, probably because the prime purpose of a daily story is to acquaint you with the facts, whereas the prime purpose of a *New Yorker* story is to enter-

* Note to Professors of English: Pay no attention to this sentence.

tain you with the facts. As far as possible we picked pieces which, though they were not out of newspapers, at least had been written by men who had been (or are now) newspaper reporters: Joseph Mitchell, Alva Johnston, Sanderson Vanderbilt, John McNulty, A. J. Liebling, St. Clair McKelway.

At any rate, in this section as in all the others, the editors decided not to include anybody or anything just for the sake of being inclusive or of getting coverage. We asked simply that we be amused, now in 1941. Our motto throughout was:

If it be not droll to we,
What care us how droll it be!

A lot of the humor of fifty to one hundred years ago was dialect humor. Then was the heyday of the crackerbarrel philosopher, sometimes wise, always wise-seeming, and nowadays rather dreary. We plunged into this period with willing hearts and open minds, and came out of it exhausted and not greatly enriched. While I was in there it occurred to me that a certain basic confusion often exists in the use of tricky or quaint or illiterate spelling to achieve a humorous effect. I mean, it is not always clear whether the author intends his character to be writing or speaking—and I, for one, feel that unless I know at least this much about what I am reading, I am off to a bad start. For instance, here are some spellings from the works of Petroleum V. Nasby: he spells “would” *wood*, “of” *uv*, “you” *yoo*, “hence” *hentz*, “office” *offis*.

Now, it happens that I pronounce “office” *offis*. And I pronounce “hence” *hentz*, and I even pronounce “of” *uv*. Therefore, I infer that Nasby’s character is supposed not to be speaking but to be writing. Yet in either case, justification for this perversion of the language is lacking; for if the character is speaking, the queer spelling is unnecessary, since the pronunciation is impossible to distinguish from the natural or ordinary pronunciation, and if the character is writing, the spelling is most unlikely. Who ever wrote “uv” for “of”? Nobody. Anyone who knows how to write at all, knows how to spell a simple word like “of.” If you can’t spell “of” you wouldn’t be able to spell anything and wouldn’t be attempting to set words to paper—much less words like “solissitood.” A person who can’t spell “of” is an illiterate, and the only time such a person attempts to write anything

down is in a great crisis. He doesn't write political essays or diaries or letters or satirical paragraphs.

In *Dere Mabel*, which is patently offered as "written" material, since it is a book of letters, some of the spelling seems highly questionable. All "ing" words are spelled "in" without the "g." This is rare, I think, in real life. Even partially or badly educated persons know the ending "ing." All schoolboys know it. It is one of the first things you learn when you learn to spell in school.

Obviously, some of the pieces by the dialect writers seemed funny to us in spite of the handicap of spelling. In the case of Dooley, the Irish dialect is difficult but worth the effort, and it smooths out after the first hundred miles. Finley Peter Dunne was a sharp and gifted humorist, who wrote no second-rate stuff, and he had the sympathetic feeling for his character which is indispensable. This same sympathy is discernible in Jewish humor—in the work of Gross, Kober, Ross. It is sympathy, not contempt or derision, that makes their characters live. Lardner's ball player was born because the author had a warm feeling for ballplayers, however boyish or goofy. The spelling in all these cases is not a device for gaining a humorous effect, but is a necessary tool for working the material, which is itself inherently humorous.

I suspect that the popularity of all dialect stuff derives in part from flattery of the reader—giving him a pleasant sensation of superiority which he gets from working out the intricacies of misspelling, and the satisfaction of detecting boorishness or illiteracy in someone else. This is not the whole story, but it has some bearing in the matter. Incidentally, I am told by an authority on juvenile literature that dialect is tops with children. They like to study out the words. When they catch on to the thing, they must feel that first fine glow of maturity—the ability to exercise higher intellectual powers than those of the character they are looking at.

Since this book is an arbitrary selection, we do not feel obliged to explain anything or to apologize for anything. The inclusion of any item can be ascribed to the editors' jaundiced taste, the omission of any item to their sheer vindictiveness.

There are some admirable American humorists who are absent from the book through no fault of their own or of ours either. One of them is Harry Leon Wilson, whose stories are too long to reprint in a volume of this sort. We tried breaking off a limb of *Merton* and of *Bunker*

Bean, but they didn't seem to do well, separated from the main trunk. Another man is Henry Thoreau. There is hardly a paragraph of *Walden* which does not seem humorous to me; but we didn't include any of it, having no wish to attitudinize, and because it, too, is unsatisfactory when broken up. Nevertheless, Thoreau makes me laugh the inaudible, the enduring laugh. Oliver Wendell Holmes is present in the book but is inadequately represented; the humor in the *Autocrat* is in such dilution as to be unsuitable for a concentrated pill.

Tall stories are commonly regarded as the rockbed of American humor, and we have included a few of them that we liked. We found, however, that tall stories can be unspeakably boring. It is possible to be quite tall without being a bit funny. We also found (or rather we verified the fact) that we had no taste for the Genial School of humor—a large school with some rather impressive pupils. Geniality is not, per se, humorous, in spite of the illusion of humor it often gives, and too often geniality turns out to be long-windedness in sheep's clothing. Verbosity is an occupational disease in America, and writing can be as dangerous as painting the luminous dials of watches. Many a humorist has been stricken fatally at an early age—you will find their dry bones in the magazines whose principal literary requirement is that every story be long enough to break over into the back pages among the advertisements.

Among those absent from this book are the Canadians. We kept the Canadians out simply because we were getting crowded for space and the Canadian border made a convenient place to stop. And while I am on the delicate subject of who is in this book and who isn't, it will be observed by the more observant readers that there are certain items in here which I wrote myself. This is an unsavory episode upon which I shall not dwell.

It will also be observed that quite a large amount of the material in here was published first in *The New Yorker*. This discovery should surprise nobody. My wife and I happen to own a complete file of the bound volumes of *The New Yorker*, and after a long evening with George Horatio Derby or somebody or other who wrote the best light verse during the McKinley administration, it would often be our stealthy custom to pull out a volume at random and dip up a nice funny piece before going to bed. We could easily have assembled the whole book from this invaluable shelf of ours, but it would have been a little tough on Washington Irving and Mark Twain and a few others

who had the misfortune to be doing their work before the magazine got well under way.

A great deal of modern humor has been born and is growing up which would never have seen the light and would still be in the kept-under stage if it had not been for the receptive attitude of *The New Yorker* toward new writers, and for its solid conviction that humor is an art form and not a barber shop fitting. We have a speaking acquaintance with *New Yorker* pieces, a parental feeling about some of them, and a high regard for the magazine and its editor and its contributors. It would be odd indeed if our book didn't show this attachment.

As for the pieces themselves, we do not pretend that they are thoroughly representative of *New Yorker* humor; we have not even included some of our favorite writers, confident that they will endure their horrid fate with characteristic poise. And my wife thinks it would be well to add, also, that where we have used two pieces by one writer and one piece by another writer, it doesn't mean that we think the first man is twice as good as the second. We may think he is only half as good and are trying to cover up.

In the back of the book you will find an alphabetical list of authors, with their dates. An author with *no* birth date can be assumed to be living. It appears that some authors elect to keep the fact of their birth a secret from the world, although it is clear from the color of their jackets that they are alive and hearty.

The same list will help you identify the many authors who used, or use, pseudonyms. There was hardly a writer prior to the Twentieth Century who signed his own name to his stuff. They must all either have been ashamed or in debt.

Analysts have had their go at humor, and I have read some of this interpretative literature, but without being greatly instructed. Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.

A certain type of humor has come to be big business in the United States. The gag factories are as impressive as Allis Chalmers, and will probably soon be taken over for defense purposes. Radio comedians employ their own corps of geniuses, who sit and think and think of something funny to say. It is sometimes rather grim business, this production for the big markets. In a newsreel theater the other day I

saw a picture of a man who had developed the soap bubble to a higher point than it had ever before reached. He had become the ace soap bubble blower of America, had perfected the business of blowing bubbles, refined it, doubled it, squared it, and had even worked himself up into a convenient lather. The effect was not pretty. Some of the bubbles were too big to be beautiful, and the blower was always jumping into them or out of them, or playing some sort of unattractive trick with them. It was, if anything, a rather repulsive sight. Humor is a little like that: it won't stand much blowing up, and it won't stand much poking. It has a certain fragility, an evasiveness, which one had best respect. Essentially, it is a complete mystery. A human frame convulsed with laughter, and the laughter becoming hysterical and uncontrollable, is as far out of balance as one shaken with the hiccoughs or in the throes of a sneezing fit.

One of the things commonly said about humorists is that they are really very sad people—clowns with a breaking heart. There is some truth in it, but it is badly stated. It would be more accurate, I think, to say that there is a deep vein of melancholy running through everyone's life and that a humorist, perhaps more sensible of it than some others, compensates for it actively and positively. Practically everyone is a manic depressive of sorts, with his up moments and his down moments, and you certainly don't have to be a humorist to taste the sadness of situation and mood. But, as everyone knows, there is often a rather fine line between laughing and crying, and if a humorous piece of writing brings a person to the point where his emotional responses are untrustworthy and seem likely to break over into the opposite realm, it is because humorous writing, like poetical writing, has an extra content. It plays, like an active child, close to the big hot fire which is Truth. And sometimes the reader feels the heat.

The world likes humor, but it treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious. Writers know this, and those who take their literary selves with great seriousness are at considerable pains never to associate their name with anything funny or flippant or nonsensical or "light." They suspect it would hurt their reputation, and they are right. Many a poet writing today signs his real name to his serious verse and a pseudonym to his comical verse, being unwilling to have the public discover him in any