

# Rivals of P. G. Wodehouse: James Thurber

BY BOB RAINS

JAMES GROVER THURBER was born on December 8, 1894, in Columbus, Ohio, a city he would put on the literary map. One day in the summer of 1901, while playing a game of William Tell with a homemade bow and blunt arrows, Thurber's older brother accidentally shot him directly in the left eye, destroying it. For reasons that remain unclear, Thurber's parents failed to get him prompt medical attention, and the damaged eye was not removed and replaced with a glass eye until several weeks later. The injury would have lifelong repercussions.

Starting in 1913, Thurber attended Ohio State University on and off, where he was a reporter and editor for both the school newspaper and the humor magazine. In May 1918, at the age of 23, with the Great War still raging, Thurber, still far short of graduating, decided to leave OSU. He obtained a cryptography job at the U.S. Department of State (alongside, among others, Stephen Vincent Benét). In October 1918 Thurber sailed for Paris with his fellow code clerks, conveniently arriving two days after the Armistice was declared. With little real cryptographic work to do, he sailed home fourteen months later and became a reporter for the *Columbus Dispatch*.

In 1922 Thurber married Althea Adams. Thurber and Althea had a daughter, Rosemary. Ultimately the marriage was not a happy one, and it ended in a rather lurid divorce in 1935. Both Thurber and his ex were married to other spouses within a very short period of time. Thurber's second wife, Helen, survived him.

By 1924 Thurber had left the *Columbus Dispatch* to become a freelance writer. The following year he returned to Paris, where he worked for the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. While in France he tried his hand at writing a novel. "It didn't work out because I got tired of the characters at the end of 5,000 words, and bade them and novel-writing farewell forever." There would be no Blandings Castle or Jeeves and Bertie sagas in his future. During his stay in Paris, Thurber heard of a fledgling magazine which had recently appeared, edited by a brilliant and quirky man named Harold Ross with high literary aspirations. Ross called his publication the *New Yorker*.

In 1926 Thurber relocated to New York and became a reporter for the *New York Evening Post*. He started submitting pieces to the *New Yorker* which "came back so fast I began to believe the *New Yorker* had a rejection machine." Finally, his wife suggested that



Bob Rains not only documents peers and rivals of Wodehouse, but he takes the time to research his subjects. Here he is at the Thurber House in Columbus, Ohio, with a bronze modeled after the creature in Thurber's story "The Unicorn in the Garden."

he was worrying too much over each piece and he should stop reworking them to death. Thurber—in his retelling, at least—set an alarm clock for 45 minutes, and gave himself that much time for his next piece. The *New Yorker* accepted it, and Ross loved it so much that he eventually sent for Thurber. So, one fateful day in February 1927, Thurber presented himself at the *New Yorker's* office and met, in short order, E. B. White and Harold Ross. Oddly, Ross hired Thurber as a managing editor, a position for which he was totally unsuited. Soon, though, Thurber was "demoted" to being a staff writer, and the rest, as they say, is literary history. He remained on the *New Yorker* staff until 1935, when he left to become a freelancer, and continued submitting pieces to it for decades, with the last one being published in 1961, the year of his death from a stroke.

Thurber produced many types of writing for the *New Yorker*, and some of his most famous works first appeared there. In March 1939 the *New Yorker* published "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," which was made into a 1947 movie starring Danny Kaye—Thurber apologized for it before it was released—and remade with Ben Stiller in 2013. A "Walter Mitty" is defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary as "a commonplace unadventurous person who seeks escape from reality through daydreaming." "Walter Mitty" was honored as Merriam-Webster's Word of the

Day on April 15, 2014, an accolade never accorded to "Jeeves," defined in the same source as "a valet or butler of model behavior." (On the other hand, unlike Walter Mitty, Jeeves has appeared as both a float and a balloon in Macy's Thanksgiving Day parades.)

Thurber never claimed to be an artist. "I'm a painstaking writer who doodles for relaxation." But, with the possible exception of Pablo Picasso, he may be the most famous doodler of all time. According to Thurber, his *New Yorker* office mate E. B. White picked up off the floor a Thurber doodle of a seal with Arctic explorers in the distance, inked it in, and tried to peddle it to Ross as an illustration for the magazine. Ross and the art staff rejected it, but White kept sending it back until Ross gave in and published it. That was just the beginning. The *New Yorker* ultimately published over 300 captioned Thurber drawings.

It is virtually impossible to describe Thurber's non-art. In her introduction to *The Seal in the Bedroom*, Dorothy Parker asserts that Thurber's drawings of people "have the outer semblance of unbaked cookies." When White and Thurber presented a sheaf of Thurber's drawings to Harper and Brothers with their manuscript of *Is Sex Necessary?*, one of the publishers assumed that they were rough ideas meant for a professional artist to execute. He was forcefully disabused of that notion, and fortunately Thurber's original drawings grace the book. One day, a real artist at the *New Yorker* asked Ross in frustration, "Why do you reject drawings of mine, and print stuff by that fifth-rate artist Thurber?" Ross sprang to Thurber's defense. "Third-rate," he replied. In 1934, Thurber's "third-rate" drawings were featured in a one-man art show in New York, the first of nine such shows during his lifetime.

Thurber was a gifted writer of captions for his cartoon drawings. A personal favorite: the man hoisting the glass of burgundy at a dinner gathering:



"It's a naïve domestic Burgundy without any breeding, but I think you'll be amused by its presumption."  
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Unfortunately, Thurber's childhood eye injury finally ended his career as a non-artist artist. As the vision in his remaining eye deteriorated through a process known as "sympathetic ophthalmia," Thurber underwent five painful and ultimately unsuccessful operations during 1940–41 to try to save it. After the operations, he was essentially blind, but with some very vestigial vision. Additionally, and understandably given his situation, Thurber often struggled with alcohol, depression, and mental breakdown. At times he fought with many old friends, even E. B. White; and his relationship with the *New Yorker* was often fraught.

Thurber was a portraitist, if not a biographer. His controversial *The Years with Ross*, while probably containing many inaccuracies, brings a brilliant genius to life. As an autobiographer in such books as *My Life and Hard Times*, Thurber is even less reliable than Wodehouse in his autobiographies.

Like Wodehouse, Thurber was a successful playwright. With his college friend Elliott Nugent, he wrote *The Male Animal*, first performed in 1940, then adapted as a 1942 movie starring Henry Fonda, Olivia de Havilland, and Joan Leslie. Thurber's revue, *A Thurber Carnival*, had a respectable Broadway run in 1960 and later was staged in London. *A Thurber Carnival* (not to be confused with the more comprehensive book *The Thurber Carnival*) includes the retelling of such Thurber classics as "The Night the Bed Fell," "The Macbeth Murder Mystery," and "If Grant Had Been Drinking at Appomattox." *A Thurber Carnival* continues to be performed, with productions as recently as March 2018 by the Gates Mills Players in Cleveland.

Incredibly, despite his blindness, Thurber was an occasional actor, appearing on Broadway in 88 performances of *A Thurber Carnival*.

Thurber was a fabulist; some of his most memorable writing is in fable format. "The Unicorn in the Garden" relates the tale of a classic "Thurber husband" who manages to turn the tables on his wife.

While not a poet per se, Thurber was lauded in the December 1943 issue of *Poetry* magazine as "the comic Prufrock." *Poetry's* editor, Peter De Vries, opined that Thurber had more in common with modern poets than with modern humorists.

Thurber's writing is often as inventive and vivid as anything penned by Wodehouse. In "The Car We Had to Push," he describes the demise of that vehicle when it was parked too close to the streetcar line and the streetcar couldn't get by:

It picked up the tired old automobile as a terrier might seize a rabbit and drubbed it

unmercifully, losing its hold now and then but catching a new grip a second later. Tires booped and whooshed, the fenders queeled and graked, the steering-wheel rose up like a specter and disappeared in the direction of Franklin Avenue with a melancholy whistling sound, bolts and gadgets flew like sparks from a Catherine wheel.

Wodehouse and Thurber both enjoyed playing with pronunciations. Ukridge's middle name Featherstonehaugh is, of course, pronounced Fanshaw. In "The Story of Sailing," Thurber relates how various sails (real and imaginary) are pronounced. Hence, the "fore-top-mast staysail halliards" are called "fazzles." (Thurber also explains that because Norsemen only had a simple square sail on their boats, they were unable to turn around, thus had to keep going straight and thereby discovered America.)

Wodehouse and Thurber shared another commonality. As the latter reported in "The Secret Life of James Thurber":

The adults around me when I was in short pants were neither so glamorous nor so attentive. They consisted mainly of eleven maternal great-aunts, all Methodists, who were staunch believers in physic, mustard plasters, and Scripture, and it was part of their dogma that artistic tendencies should be treated in the same way as hiccups or hysterics.

Both Thurber and Wodehouse lived to write. In a 1958 interview, Thurber said, "I write basically because it's so much fun—even though I can't see. When I'm not writing, as my wife knows, I'm miserable." Wodehouse would often slip away from Ethel's parties to go off and write. Thurber went one step further and composed in his head during his wife's parties: "Helen will come up and say, 'Thurber, stop writing. That girl has been talking to you for ten minutes and you never even realized she was there.' And I have to admit I was preoccupied because I had just realized how to get out of a certain paragraph."

The two men had markedly different philosophies of writing humor. Wodehouse famously described his method of writing novels as "making a sort of musical comedy without music, and ignoring real life altogether." Thurber, on the other hand, claimed that his writing was based on truth distorted for emphasis and amusement—but truth. "It is reality twisted to the right into humor rather than to the left into tragedy." Furthermore, Thurber's writing was often political,



Bob sports a Thurber cartoon T-shirt as he poses in front of the Thurber House (now a literary center) at 77 Jefferson Avenue in Columbus.

overtly or covertly. He was very critical of McCarthyism and the Red Scare. His play *The Male Animal* involves a college professor who kindles a free speech debate by planning to read Bartolomeo Vanzetti's sentencing statement. In 1950, Thurber rejected an honorary degree from Ohio State University in protest against a gag rule it had imposed on outside speakers. Irrational fear of propaganda is, of course, the theme of his fable "The Very Proper Gander."

Especially toward the end of his long writing career, Wodehouse understandably had trouble creating new plots. Thus, on July 5, 1956, he wrote to Guy Bolton that he was "still trying without success to think of a plot for a novel." Thurber claimed to have no such problem. In a 1958 interview, he said, "I don't have that fear that suddenly it all will stop. I have enough outlined to last me as long as I live."

There appears to have been no personal relationship between Thurber and Wodehouse. Both published collections of letters; none of the collections contain correspondence with the other. In *Conversations with James Thurber*, a series of edited interviews, Thurber references many authors he has read and admired, but he doesn't mention Wodehouse. Nevertheless, Thurber was among the notable writers who cosigned the "Happy Birthday, Mr. Wodehouse" message published in the *New York Times* in October 1960 that lauded Wodehouse as "an inimitable international institution and master humorist." Wodehouse included Thurber stories in three humor collections which he edited or coedited. In *The Best of Modern Humor* (1952), coedited with Scott Meredith, the editors introduce Thurber's story "The Private Life of Mr. Bidwell" with the comment that "Thurber is easily one of America's

best and most popular writers, and no humor or short story anthology would be complete without him."

One of Thurber's more unusual stories—collected in *My World and Welcome to It*—is "You Could Look It Up," first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1941. The story tells the tale of Pearl du Monville, a 35-inch-tall midget hired by baseball team manager Squawks Magrew, with the intention that he (Pearl) would always draw a walk, as no pitcher would be able to find his strike zone. Ten years after its first publication, Bill Veeck, flamboyant owner of the St. Louis Browns, famously played Eddie Gaedel, 3 feet 7 inches tall, in a game against the Tigers, with the same purpose in mind. Gaedel did indeed draw a walk in his one and only major league appearance, thus earning an enviable 1.000 on-base percentage. Veeck never credited Thurber as his inspiration, but you can draw your own conclusion. Veeck's stunt has never been repeated, and it is unlikely that any baseball commissioner would approve hiring a similar "athlete" for the majors. Query: Did any of Wodehouse's writing ever change the course of a professional sporting event?

Upon Thurber's death in November 1961, the *New Yorker* published a remembrance acknowledging its indebtedness and gratitude: "His work was largely unclassifiable (it was simply Thurber), and by the end it gave him a place in history as one of the great comic artists and one of the great American humorists." Although Thurber often denied in interviews that his humor was gentle, much of it has that same gentle, unreal quality that we so love in Wodehouse. Surely, *The Thurber Carnival* (which includes the complete *My Life and Hard Times*) contains many stellar, laugh-out-loud writings that should bring cheer to even the least grunted among us.

Happily, some good people bought and renovated the Columbus, Ohio, house in which Thurber lived during his college days and opened its doors to the public in 1984. The Thurber House ([www.thurberhouse.org](http://www.thurberhouse.org)) has become a destination for writers and aspiring writers, as well as for Thurber enthusiasts in general. It offers residencies for writers of adult and children's literature and sponsors the Thurber Prize for American Humor.

To mark the 125th anniversary of Thurber's birth, Thurber House has designated 2019 as "The Year of Thurber." Several new collections of his works will be published, and the Columbus Museum of Art will feature an exhibition of his original drawings. Those planning to attend the upcoming TWS convention in Cincinnati might consider stopping off in Columbus to visit the exhibition and the Thurber House.

## Starrett on Wodehouse

ACCORDING TO Wikipedia, TWS's own Pale Parabolite George Vanderburgh is publishing a complete edition of Vincent Starrett's works. There are already 22 volumes in print, and George tells us that there may be as many as 28. In the process of collecting all of Starrett's writings, George discovered some comments about Plum. Here's a nugget from Starrett's column ("Books Alive") in the *Chicago Tribune*:

Villains, according to P. G. Wodehouse, may be divided into three classes—all silly. To wit: sinister natives who are on the trail of a jewel stolen from the eye of an idol; men with a grudge that has lasted as fresh as ever for thirty years; and "master criminals." P. G. must have been thinking of his youth when he wrote that; it has been long years since those stereotypes were popular. Today's villains are more formidable characters, realistic enough to scare the pants off cozily slipped readers of an older generation, like Wodehouse and your reporter.

And from "M. P. Shiel: An Undisciplined Genius":

For myself, I confess, a sense of madness accompanies a reading of Shiel; I turn with relief to that other wild master, the eminent Wodehouse, and laugh maniacally at his equally preposterous creations. Sometimes I think I would like Shiel better if he displayed less genius and more talent. But if you have a strong grip on sanity, you may be able to read this undisciplined "Lord of our Language"—as he has been called—with somewhat of the rapture he inspires in the members of the Shiel cult, now broadening down the years.

The school which I propose to found . . . will have as its object the education of moving-picture villains in the difficult art of killing moving-picture heroines. The scheme deserves, and will doubtless command, public sympathy and support, for we all want moving-picture heroines killed. Is there one amongst us who would not have screamed with joy if Pauline had perished in the second reel or the Clutching Hand had massacred that princess of bores, Elaine? But these pests carried on a charmed life simply because the villain, with the best intentions, did not know the proper way to go about the job.

Vanity Fair (October 1915)