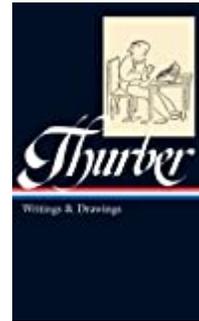


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**James Thurber.** *Writings and Drawings*. New York: Library of America, 1996. xiii + 1004 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-883011-22-2.



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**Published on** H-PCAACA (June, 1997)

In what will surely become the standard collection of James Thurber, *Writings and Drawings* collects well over 100 pieces, from 19 books, plus a number of uncollected essays, dating from the mid-20s to 1958. The volume's 1000+ pages are gathered and sewn in a 5x8 cloth binding that rests easily in hand. Layout, print, page tone, and page quality are everything they should be for a book that will be read and reread.

One slight demur with the editorial policy of this Library of America publication. While the name of Garrison Keillor will help sell books, should he be called "editor" when all has done is make the selection of what is to be included? I expected at least an introduction or tribute from this estimable contemporary humorist, but there's nothing of that sort. Meanwhile, at the back of the book, someone or ones did thirty pages of work setting up a detailed chronology of Thurber's life, reading notes, and publication information on each selection. This doesn't deserve credit too? I thought we were past the bad old days, when news magazines and other publications could get away with by-lining one name for published work that obviously incorporated the research and writing of others.

One can't fault what Keillor selected, however. One rereads with pleasure the familiar anthology pieces such as "University Days," "The Night the Ghost Got In," "The

Catbird Seat" and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." But now one can read the other stories that form the episodic sequence with or thematic support for the familiar ones. "University Days" and "The Night the Ghost Got In," for instance, are here placed with the rest of the autobiographical volume entitled *My Life and Hard Times* (1933), including such companion pieces as "The Car We Had to Push" and, appropriately after "University Days," "Draft Board Nights." To read all these stories in sequence is to place Thurber firmly in the tradition of Clarence Day's family comedies and the companion tradition of humorous boys' books, stretching through Penrod and Sam back to Mark Twain's stories. The first person tells his family's story with adult irony that is cleverly concealed in the style rather than direct commentary. It's a comfortable world where adults are more funny than the children—because they frequently behave like children. His mother, imagining burglars in the house, throws a shoe through the neighbor's window to get him to call the police; her son, the narrator, has to restrain her from throwing the other shoe through another window, which she wanted to do to repeat the thrill of the smash.

James Thurber was our Aesop, too. *Fables for Our Time & Famous Poems Illustrated* (1940) is included in its entirety, along with selections from *Further Fables...* (1956) and the wonderfully parodic "The 13 Clocks."

While the humor has always been there, when one reads a number of these pieces together, the morals become more than punchlines; you realize that James Thurber was a moral satirist. “You can fool too many people too much of the time” and “It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all the answers” grow logically out of the fables and ripple outward from there. Accompanying the fables or in sequences by themselves are the cartoons, most looking half-finished, a style that the *New Yorker* continues to the present. With the stories or in sequence, their lack of finish or bordering give them the illusion of being sketched from life; they are quick illustrations, suggestive rather than stand-alone jokes. They go with the fables like pictures in a child’s book, such as the asymmetrical “Owl Who Was God,” or the head of the rooster a moment before he’s beheaded by ice cubes beside “The Hen and the Heavens.”

The animal cartoons are joined by all the men and women cartoons, wherein the human race shows its combative absurdities, as well as an essential discontent that just might kill it off. “The War Between Men and Women” (1934), won by men, but not without pitched battles, joins in theme with “The Last Flower” (1939) which is as effective a prophecy, in its way, of the likelihood of human apocalypse as any science fiction written during the Cold War. Most of the men-women cartoons, of course, are less dire, coinciding in subject and tone with the Hollywood screwball comedies of the time or earlier comedies

of manners.

What I had not realized before reading this collection was the fun Thurber had with Freud, Jung, and their popularizers who became all the fashion between the world wars. *Is Sex Necessary?* (1929) and *Let Your Mind Alone!* (1937) show how much more interesting life is, especially battles with the opposite sex, when you can factor in an Unconscious. Nothing ever need be simple again! Thurber cleverly shows the debt owed Psychology for helping us stave off boredom.

*Writings and Drawings* is rounded off by essays on the years at the *New Yorker*, memories of Harold Ross and the stable of writers he gathered together. This section of the book reminds one of the wonderful legacy of humor that is ours, and perhaps prompts one to question when “the canon,” as represented by standard American Literature texts, will begin to feature enough of this legacy. Until then, we should all keep buying Thurber and E.B. White (and Keillor), and giving them as gifts to the people who matter—the ones who haven’t forgotten how to laugh at themselves.

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**Citation:** W. M. Hagen. Review of Thurber, James, *Writings and Drawings*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1063>

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