

THE MAGAZINE OF THE OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES COUNCIL

Oklahoma
HUMANITIES

WINTER 2014

We Love Lucy!
American Humor

OHC BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Dr. William Bryans, Chair
Oklahoma State University

Dr. Susan McCarthy, Vice Chair/Sec.
Oklahoma City

Mary Blankenship Pointer, Treasurer
Oklahoma City

J. Edward Barth
Oklahoma City

Dr. Mary Brodnax
University of Central Oklahoma

Judy Cawthon
Edmond

Beverly Davis
Oklahoma City

Ken Fergeson
Altus

Dr. Britton Gildersleeve
Tulsa

Hannibal Johnson
Tulsa

Dr. Scott LaMascus
Oklahoma Christian University

John Martin
Enid

Lynn McIntosh
Ardmore

Mary Ellen Meredith
Oklahoma City

Lou Nelson
Guymon

Brenda Porton
Broken Bow

Dr. Gordon Taylor
Tulsa

Dr. Jerry Vannatta
University of Oklahoma

Valorie Walters
Ada

Susan Webb
Oklahoma City

Darlene Williams
Jenks

J. Ron Wright
Muskogee

Oklahoma HUMANITIES

VOLUME 7, ISSUE NO. 1

WINTER 2014

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	<i>Ann Thompson</i>
EDITOR, DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS	<i>Carla Walker</i>
MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR	<i>Traci Jinkens</i>
PROGRAM OFFICER	<i>Kelly Elsey</i>
PROGRAM OFFICER	<i>Caroline Lowery</i>
FISCAL OFFICER	<i>Charles White</i>
ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR	<i>Brandi Davis</i>

Oklahoma HUMANITIES is published three times per year: January, May, and September by the Oklahoma Humanities Council (OHC), 428 W. California Ave., Ste. 270, Oklahoma City, OK 73102, (405) 235-0280, www.okhumanities.org.

OHC is an independent, nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide meaningful public engagement with the humanities—disciplines such as history, literature, film studies, ethics, and philosophy. The humanities offer a deeper understanding of ourselves and others by confronting us with the questions, values, and meanings of the human experience. As the state partner for the National Endowment for the Humanities, OHC brings people together to explore these ideas through programming and community grants that support book groups, exhibits, film festivals, teacher institutes, and more. OHC engages people in their own communities, providing forums for education, critical thinking, and productive civil discourse.

The opinions expressed in *Oklahoma* HUMANITIES are those of the authors. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in the magazine do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Oklahoma Humanities Council, its Board of Trustees, staff, or donors.

Reader letters are welcome and may be directed to the editor at: carla@okhumanities.org or by mailing to the above address. Letters are published subject to editorial discretion and may be edited for clarity or space.

Oklahoma HUMANITIES is distributed free of charge to supporters of the Oklahoma Humanities Council. For a free one-year subscription—or to obtain detailed information on our privacy policy—visit okhumanities.org or call us at: (405) 235-0280.

ON THE COVER

Lucille Ball, Alexander Novoseltsev. Digital artist Alexander Novoseltsev creates illustrations and realistic caricatures of famous people and characters. His caricatures have been among winning entries in competitions, including Facebook's Caricaturama Showdown 3000. His work was also included in *Simply the Best 2*, an international juried online exhibition from Digital Arts: California. Alex lives and works in Samara, Russia. be.net/alexnovoseltsev or facebook.com/alexander.novoseltsev





IN EVERY ISSUE

- 4 From the Executive Director
- 5 From the OHC Board of Trustees
- 31 End Notes from the Editor



OklahomaHumanitiesCouncil



okhumanities



OKHumanitiesCouncil

NEWS FLASH: The humanities have a sense of humor! Oh, we know our fuddy-duddy reputation: history, literature, and art criticism are scorned as “elitist”; jurisprudence and comparative religion labeled “scholarly”; ethics and philosophy pegged “esoteric.” In this issue, we prick those lead balloons and take humor on a joyride through this satire-comedy-farce-parody-slapstick-hilarity we call the human endeavor. Find out how comedy can break the barriers of race and gender—or solidify them. See how humor frames our politics and our worldview. Discover how group laughter reveals whether we’re insiders or outsiders. For fun we’ll throw in a poem or two, a good yarn, and tomfoolery too. Can the humanities be funny? Judge for yourself.

FEATURES

6
The American Sense of Humor
 Americans have always placed a high value on their ability to laugh.
 BY M. THOMAS INGE

9
Will Rogers in the 21st Century Influencing Politics with Humor
 Move over, Jon Stewart. Will was there first.
 BY BRETT S. SHARP

14
The Witty N. Scott Momaday
 Humor from an Oklahoma Treasure.

15
Skirting Stereotypes—Women in Comedy
 It’s not about gender, it’s about humanity.
 BY JOANNA E. RAPF

19
In Defense of Typos, Creative Spelling, and General Proofreading Tomfoolery
 The catharsis of thesaurus and other strange communications.
 BY VIKI CRAIG

20
A Brief History of African American Humor
 The rich tradition that evolved from 19th-century minstrelsy.
 BY GERALD EARLY

27
A Word that Changed the World
 In comedy, and in life, timing is everything.
 BY STEVE HELLER



From the Executive Director
ANN THOMPSON

In November, several OHC staff and board members attended the National Humanities Conference, held in Birmingham, Alabama. The annual event, sponsored by the Federation of State Humanities Councils, is an opportunity for the 56 state and territorial humanities councils to come together to learn best practices for programming, fundraising, and advocacy, and, through special speakers, to be inspired to continue our work for the public good.

In recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of several civil rights events, the conference theme was "Lifting Us Up: Reflection, Reconciliation, and Renewal." Our opening session was held in the 16th Street Baptist Church, a center for civil rights activities that was bombed in 1963 by KKK members, killing four young girls.

Imagine sitting in that sanctuary today, listening to individuals who have connections to that tragic event. Judge Helen Shores Lee described how, as a young girl, her home on so-called "Dynamite Hill" was bombed repeatedly. Diane McWhorter discussed her research into why many whites in Birmingham at that time did not question anti-black attacks. Doug Jones, former U.S. Attorney, related the efforts to successfully try the church bombers and bring them to justice.

Freeman Hrabowski, President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, was our keynote speaker. He told us about participating in the Birmingham children's march at just twelve years old, how he was spat upon by Bull Connor, Commissioner of Public Safety, and jailed for five days. When Dr. Hrabowski's mother called many years later to inform him of Connor's death, she admonished him for his initial feeling of relief on hearing the news. "He was somebody's child," she said.

This story epitomizes the inspiring message of reflection, reconciliation, and renewal we carry from our time at the conference. It points to the heart of the work of state humanities councils: to ask the hard questions, to explore issues through the perspective of the humanities, to encourage discussion in a safe forum, and ultimately, we hope, to inspire a thoughtful understanding of the human experience.

WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBERS

The Oklahoma Humanities Council is proud to welcome the following as new members of our Board of Trustees.

KEN FERGESON has been a major contributor to the banking industry and to his community as the Chairman of NBC Oklahoma in Altus, Oklahoma. He has served on boards and councils at local, state, and national levels in the banking arena and in his personal interest of supporting and promoting the arts. He is the current chairman of the Mid-America Arts Alliance Board and immediate past chairman of the national Americans for the Arts organization. He is a past chairman of the American Bankers Association and continues to be active with the Oklahoma Bankers Association. His membership on the Native American Cultural and Educational Authority Board is by appointment of the Oklahoma Governor. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 2009, received the Oklahoma Governor's Arts Award in 1994 and 2000, and was the recipient of the 2001 Business in Arts Leadership Award by the Business Committee for the Arts, Inc. (BCA) and FORBES Magazine. He holds a bachelor's degree in business and a master's in economics from Texas Tech University.

HANNIBAL B. JOHNSON is a graduate of Harvard Law School. He is an attorney, author, and independent consultant and has served as an adjunct professor at universities across Oklahoma. Johnson is past president of the Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League and past president of the Northeast Oklahoma Black Lawyers Association. He currently serves on the Oklahoma Advisory Committee for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and is a member of the Programs Committee for the John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation. Among his numerous honors are: 2013 The Inclusives diversity award from Tulsa's Young Professionals; 2012 Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher Diversity Award from the Oklahoma Bar Association; Keeping The Dream Alive award from the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemoration Society; Outstanding Service to the Public Award from the Oklahoma Bar Association; Distinguished Leadership Award from the National Association for Community Leadership; 2005 Ralph Ellison Literary Award from the Black Liberated Arts Center; and the 2006 Oklahoma Human Rights Award from the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission.

VALORIE WALTERS earned a bachelor of arts degree in mass communications with a concentration in advertising and public relations from East Central University. She has been employed with the Chickasaw Nation since 2002, including positions as education specialist and special projects coordinator. She currently serves as the Executive Officer for the Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur, Oklahoma, where her duties include overseeing day-to-day operations of the center. An enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, her Native heritage is Chickasaw/Choctaw.

Send your comments, questions, and suggestions to
Editor Carla Walker at: carla@okhumanities.org or mail
correspondence to *Oklahoma* HUMANITIES, Attn.: Editor,
428 W. California Ave., Ste. 270, Oklahoma City, OK 73102.



WHY I GIVE

Full disclosure: board members of the Oklahoma Humanities Council are expected to contribute financially as well as invest their time and supportive concern, which is only fair if we're to seek financial support for OHC from others. Once familiar with the work of the Council, however, the opportunity to help maintain OHC programs is as much a privilege as an obligation, since the humanities are crucial components of a healthy society.

Dr. Gordon Taylor
University of Tulsa, Emeritus
OHC Board of Trustees

Long before I knew about the Council, I became involved in its *Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma* program, discussions of diverse books in public libraries and other venues across our state. Sessions are facilitated by visiting scholars, but first and foremost enable readers from all walks to interact with humanities texts and, through that medium, engage with one another. Among the authors we explored in such groups were Maxine Hong Kingston, Ralph Ellison, Mary Chesnut, Michael Herr, Edith Wharton, Henry James, Anne Tyler, and Saul Bellow. In retrospect, this grass-roots experience and others like it, as much as my career as a professor of American literature at the University of Tulsa, sustain my wish to assist the full spectrum of OHC programs and grants (funding projects large and small) that enhance public exposure to the humanities.

While the Council is local and regional in focus, through its linkage with the National Endowment for the Humanities it is part of a national circulatory system of humanities-related energy and interest. Anyone, anywhere, is potentially a beneficiary of the ways the Council helps enrich the intellectual and cultural environment—across boundaries: personal and social, economic and ethnic, political and geographic.

I'll continue to give to OHC after my service on the board is complete. I hope you'll join me. To make a secure gift, visit www.okhumanities.org/donate or contact the Council at (405) 235-0280.



From the OHC Board of Trustees
DR. WILLIAM BRYANS, CHAIR

While vacationing in Seattle, my wife purchased for me a t-shirt emblazoned on the front with "Sarcasm! Just One More Service I Offer." She got it because it was funny—and appropriate. Raised in New Jersey and academically trained as a historian, sarcasm and cynicism come naturally to me. You might think these traits make me bitter, but I am actually happy and well adjusted—I think. I just find the irony and the (sometimes) absurdity of reality amusing. This is my so-called sense of humor, but I suspect what makes one laugh is highly individualistic. Some find slapstick amusing. Others like a good farce or satire. The unexpected and exaggerated often provoke laughter. The author E. B. White thought humor better left unexplained since trying to understand it is, well, unfunny.

Laughing seems almost as necessary as breathing. Beyond making us feel good, humor provides socially acceptable avenues for addressing uncomfortable situations and coping with difficult circumstances. It can also be very insightful. Why is it, I wonder, that I often find the commentary of *The Daily Show* or *The Onion* both funny and astute? This edition of *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* looks at the intersection between humor and the humanities. I invite you to read and relish a few of the things that make us laugh.

One thing is decidedly not funny—namely, the continual cuts in funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities and the corresponding reduction in federal support received by the Oklahoma Humanities Council (approximately 20% over the last three years). Now more than ever, the Council needs your support to meet its mission of promoting meaningful public engagement with the humanities. Please consider contributing to the Council. Give me a reason to abandon my sarcasm when thinking about its financial future.

THE AMERICAN SENSE OF HUMOR

By M. Thomas Inge

Americans have always placed a high value on their ability to laugh.

For one brief moment in our history, it seemed that there was no humor in the land—September 11, 2001. For the next few days, no jokes were passed among friends on the Internet. *The New Yorker* published no cartoons in its issue that week for the first time since Hiroshima and shrouded its cover in black. Dave Barry announced to his readers, “No humor column today. I don’t want to write it, and you don’t want to read it.”

Editorial cartoonists, caught with no time for reflection, traded in their wit and caricature for outrage and cliché and produced multiple images of the Statue of Liberty or Uncle Sam weeping or averting their faces from the carnage. The irreverent weekly newspaper, *The Onion*, cancelled its next edition. The David Letterman and Jay Leno shows went into reruns, and the comedy clubs closed down. Even Garry Trudeau in *Doonesbury* declared his favorite target, George W. Bush, off-limits.

Comedy writers and performers gathered in New York for a symposium on “Humor in Unfunny Times” to discuss what their function should be at a time when the nation was racked by grief. Several public intellectuals declared that irony, sarcasm, and comic cynicism had died in a country that has prided itself on its caustic sense of humor.

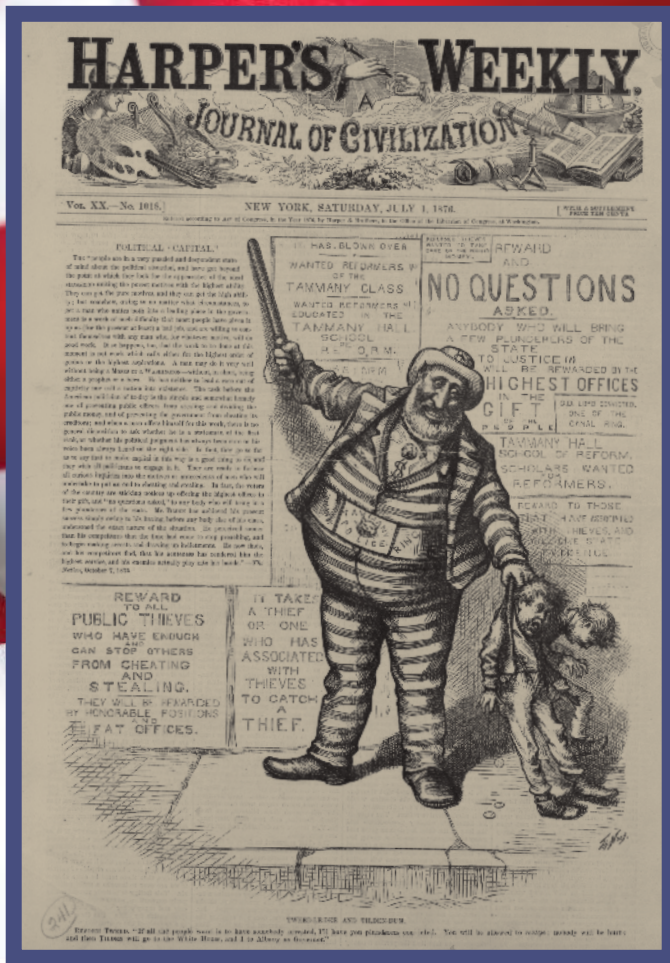
Finally permission to laugh came when Mayor Rudy Guiliani appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, along with New York City police, fire, and rescue personnel. After an opening tribute, the show’s executive producer, Lorne Michaels, asked the mayor, “Can we be funny?” Guiliani quipped, “Why start now?”

This was a defining moment in our history, because Americans have always placed a high value on their ability to laugh. Rather than be discouraged, the use of humor encourages us to try again and see if we can’t get it right the next time. Laughter is a healthy corrective, and it serves to adjust our hopes and expectations to the reality of what’s actually possible in this increasingly precarious world.

William Faulkner once noted, “We have one priceless universal trait, we Americans. That trait is our humor.” Americans



Join or Die, woodcut print created by Benjamin Franklin for *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 9, 1754. In one of the earliest political cartoons in American history, the colonies, represented by a segmented snake with abbreviated colony names, are admonished to “join or die.” Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-9701.



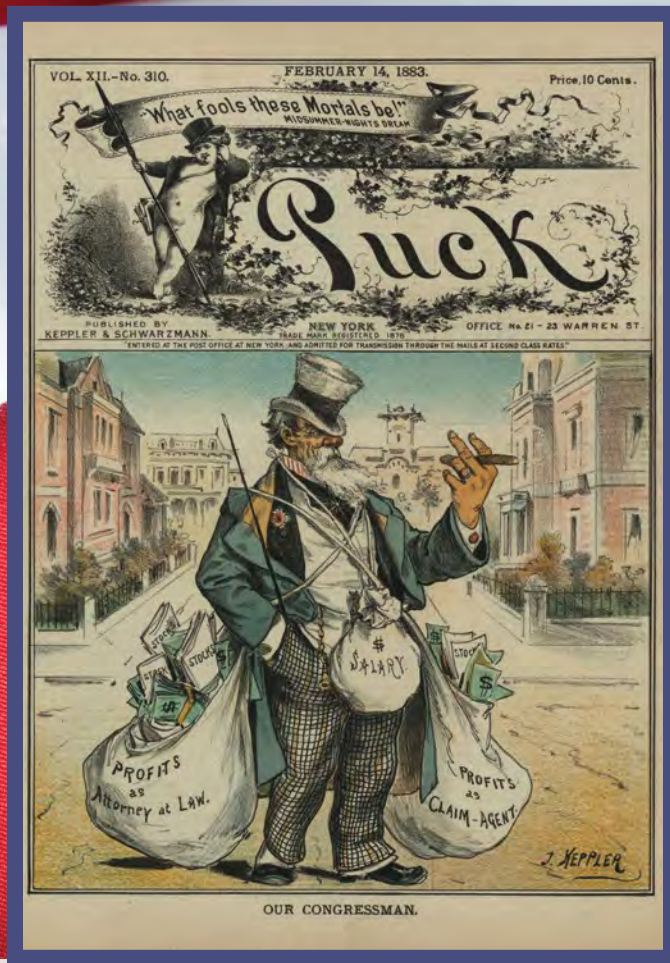
Tweed-Le-Dee and Tilden-Dum. Boss Tweed as policeman “Reform Tweed,” quips, “If all the people want is to have somebody arrested, I’ll have you plunderers convicted. You will be allowed to escape; nobody will be hurt; and then Tilden will go to the White House, and I to Albany as Governor.” Illustration by Thomas Nast for *Harper’s Weekly*, July 1, 1876. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-117137.

are thought to have a special sense of humor that often features exaggeration and hyperbole. But our sense of humor has a direct link to our political system, what Robert Penn Warren once called a “burr under the metaphysical saddle of America.”

The democratic system posits high values—not only life and liberty, but the pursuit of happiness for heaven’s sake! Not to mention equality, justice, and freedom of speech. And then there are the politicians entrusted with achieving them. We still laugh at Mark Twain’s quip, “There is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress.”

Little wonder then that the editorial or political cartoon has been a mainstay in the media of this country from its very founding. One of the earliest political cartoons to appear in a newspaper was attributed to Benjamin Franklin in the May 9, 1754 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The crude drawing portrayed a snake cut into separate portions like the states, with the injunction “Join, or Die,” a warning that political survival in the colonies depended on union and mutual respect. Not much humor there really, except in the odd choice of the snake, given all its symbolic weight, as the image of the emerging nation.

Although Franklin and Paul Revere are credited with early political cartoons, it wasn’t until Thomas Nast and Joseph Keppler



Our Congressman. A richly dressed man in a neighborhood of lavish homes, with two bags of money labeled “Profits as Attorney of Law” and “Profits as Claim-Agent.” A smaller bag at his waist is labeled “Salary.” Illustration by Joseph F. Keppler, c. 1883 by Keppler & Schwarzmann, for *Puck* magazine, February 14, 1883. Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-28362.

in the nineteenth century that they became a major force. Nast’s satiric vision was so penetrating and influential that his cartoons seemed to have an effect on national affairs. One of his Civil War drawings is credited with assuring Abraham Lincoln’s re-election in 1864, and his unrelenting attacks on William “Boss” Tweed contributed to Tweed’s downfall and imprisonment.

Although few would have such direct influence, many notable comic artists would follow Nast’s path into political cartooning as a profession: Rollin Kirby, Jay “Ding” Darling, Herbert L. Block (Herblock), Bill Mauldin, Pat Oliphant, Paul Conrad, and Jeff MacNelly.

Do readers pay attention? Sometimes with startling results. While readers mostly respond with letters of complaint, in 1987 a reader was so incensed with a cartoon by Tony Auth in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that he broke into Auth’s office, trashed it, and warned that if it wasn’t for his religion and humanity, he would have killed the cartoonist.

More recently, in the January 29, 2006 issue of *The Washington Post*, a cartoon by Tom Toles criticized statements about the war in Iraq made by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. The depiction was a symbolic figure of an American soldier who had lost both arms and legs. A few days later, on February 2, *The Post* published

**"What's This About Your Letting the Common People
Come in Here and Read Books?"**



"What's This About Your Letting the Common People Come in Here and Read Books?" A 1954 Herb Block Cartoon, published June 6, 1954, in the *Washington Post*; c. The Herb Block Foundation.

a letter attacking the cartoon as "callous" and "reprehensible" and signed by the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the only time in memory that a single letter had been signed by all five members for any purpose, much less a cartoon.

Such radical responses as these are rare in the history of the political cartoon. Mainly the drawings serve the same function as does all successful humor in providing a useful reality check. Walt Kelly, former editorial cartoonist and creator of the popular political comic strip *Pogo*, once put it best: "Humor should not be regarded as the sweetening around a sour pill. It is something that clears the air, makes life more real, and therefore less frightening." Thus, humor is important because it gives us perspective.

Recently Professor Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire in England undertook the most comprehensive study of the psychology of humor ever completed. After collecting more than 10,000 popular jokes, he asked more than 100,000 people in 70 countries to rate them. When preliminary results were announced, the joke that emerged as number one goes this way:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are going camping. They pitch their tent under the stars and go to sleep. Sometime in the middle of the night Holmes wakes Watson up: "Watson, look up at the stars, and tell me what you deduce."

Watson says, "I see millions of stars and even if a few of those have planets, it's quite likely there are some planets

like Earth, and if there are a few planets like Earth out there, there might also be life."

Holmes replies: "Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent!"

Not everyone will agree that this is the funniest joke ever told, but here we see how incongruity is at the heart of what makes us laugh. It is the difference between the high-minded Dr. Watson and his lofty notions about the universe and the practical reality of the down-to-earth Sherlock Holmes that occasions comedy.

We hold nothing above ridicule in the exercise of free speech—the law, government, religion, the President, or the Pope. Few nations so willingly celebrate their failures and foolishness through hilarity and the horse laugh as do Americans, and that's one reason we remain resilient and survive. A gauge of the success of our system is our willingness to abide and absorb ridicule and comic criticism.

Even President George W. Bush dared to engage in self-deprecation, when he wasn't inadvertently committing malapropisms. He told the graduating class at Yale, "To those of you who received honors, awards, and distinctions, I say well done. And to the C students I say, you, too, can be President of the United States."

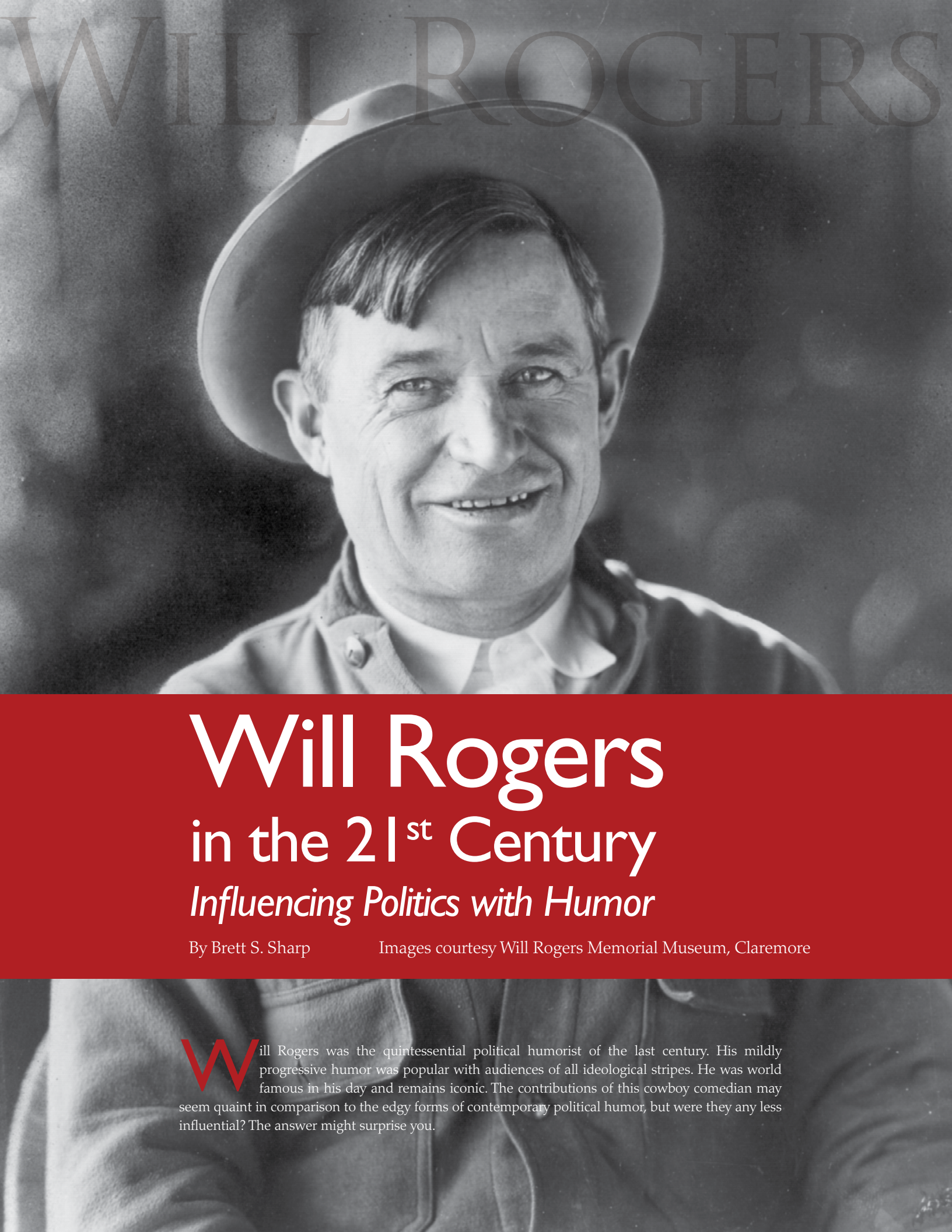
The late, great animator, Chuck Jones (who gave us such iconic examples of comic frustration as Elmer Fudd, Wile E. Coyote, and Michigan J. Frog) demonstrated his keen insight into human nature when he reflected (echoing Mark Twain): "You must remember always that only man, of all creatures, can blush, or needs to; that only man can laugh, or needs to; and that if you are in that trade of helping others to laugh and to survive by laughter, then you are privileged indeed."

Isn't it odd that in our culture academics and intellectuals have always valued tragedy and the serious over comedy and the light-hearted? Without the latter, how could we bear up under the former? Tragedy is the human condition which we are powerless to change. Comedy is the only available remedy because it posits freedom of choice and the possibility of salvation and regeneration. Tragedy is the harbinger of defeat, but comedy is the instinct for survival. He who laughs today lives to laugh another day.

May the saving grace of comedy be with us always.

M. THOMAS INGE is Professor of Humanities at Randolph-Macon College, Virginia. He holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University and has written or edited more than sixty volumes, including *Charles M. Schulz: Conversations* (2000); *The Humor of the Old South*, with Edward J. Piacentino; *Comics as Culture* (1990); and, with Dennis Hall, a four-volume set, *The Greenwood Guide to American Popular Culture* (2002). He was a founder of the American Humor Studies Association and has served as editor of the association's journal *Studies in American Humor*. Inge's comments on humor, on which this essay is based, have appeared in *AH!*, a blog about American humor and humor studies.

EXTRA! Link to exhibits and archives of editorial cartoons; read about the political cartooning of popular children's author Dr. Seuss; learn more about the use of caricature and stereotypes in editorial cartoons; watch a video about cartooning legend Herb Block; find discussion questions, classroom readings, and more: okhumanities.org/extra



Will Rogers

in the 21st Century

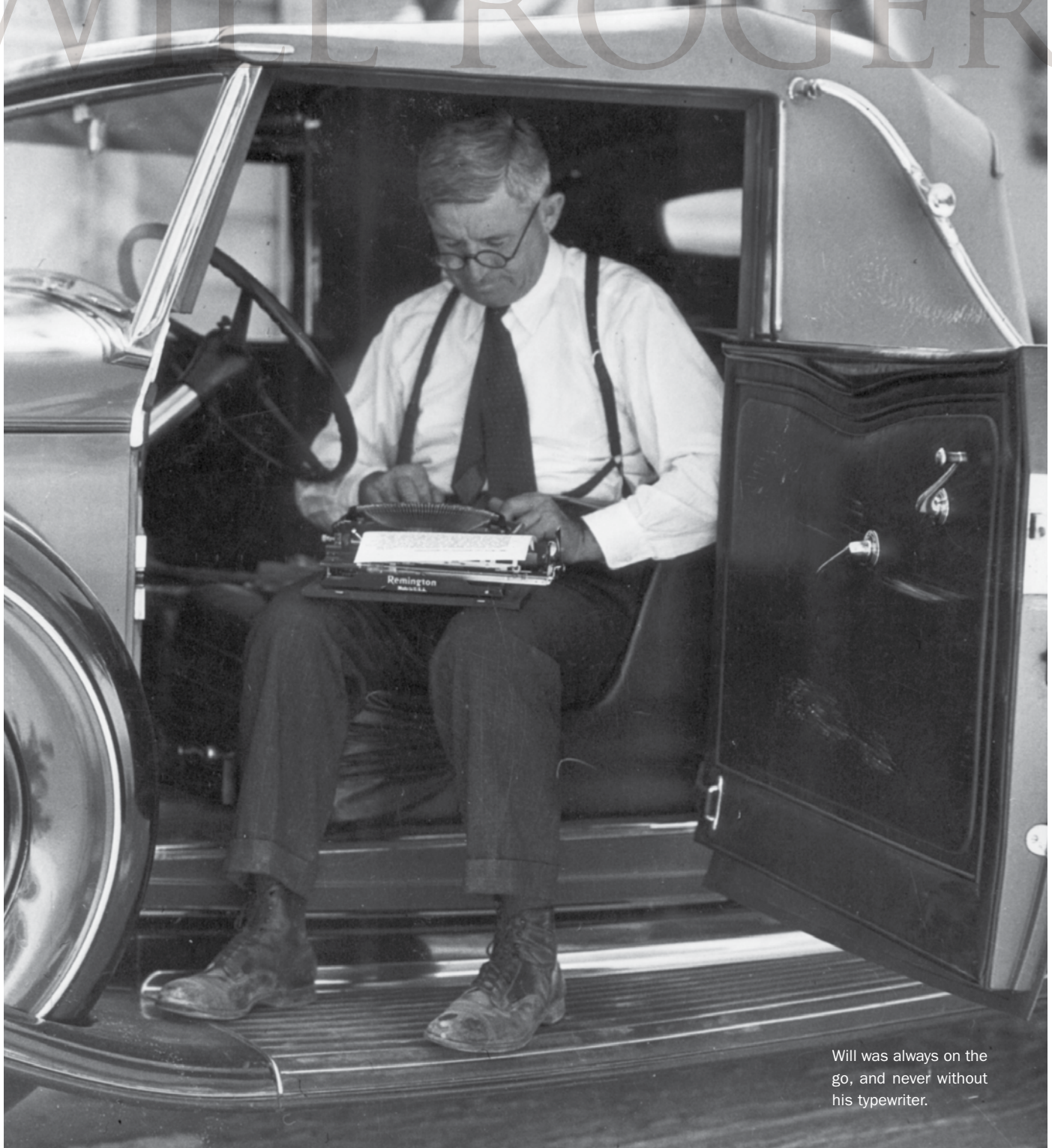
Influencing Politics with Humor

By Brett S. Sharp

Images courtesy Will Rogers Memorial Museum, Claremore

Will Rogers was the quintessential political humorist of the last century. His mildly progressive humor was popular with audiences of all ideological stripes. He was world famous in his day and remains iconic. The contributions of this cowboy comedian may seem quaint in comparison to the edgy forms of contemporary political humor, but were they any less influential? The answer might surprise you.

WILL ROGERS



Will was always on the go, and never without his typewriter.

Technology is democratizing political humor.

Audiences can access entertainment across rapidly increasing media outlets: cable and satellite channels, websites, blogs, podcasts, social media, digital magazines, smart phone apps—the list goes on and on. Anyone with an appetite for political humor is spoiled for choice; consequently, audiences become more and more fragmented.

A humorist who wants to make a significant difference in the political realm needs to attract sufficient attention. It's a difficult

task given all the competition. But there *are* forceful concentrations of political power in the comedic world. In fact, these spheres of influence rival traditional news and commentary for the attention of the American public—especially among younger audiences. Studies indicate that, since the 2000 election, more and more people get their political news from late-night talk shows and the so-called fake newscasts. A fake news show adopts all the visual appeal and stylistic elements of a real news program and even covers many of the same stories, but does so through parody and

satire. According to Nielsen Ratings, Comedy Central's coverage of the 2012 Republican National Convention beat FOX News, MSNBC, and CNN in the key demographic of adults aged 18 to 34.

Jay Leno's nightly monologues on NBC's *The Tonight Show* are as near mythic in political influence as Walter Cronkite's commentary as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*. Similarly, David Letterman, Jimmy Fallon, Jimmy Kimmel, Conan O'Brien, and Craig Ferguson include political commentary in their monologues, which is often picked up and reported by major news outlets.

Surprisingly, today's comedic universe operates very much like that of Will Rogers's. The mists of history cloud our collective memory so that the essence of Rogers is often captured only in caricature; but let us not underestimate his enduring contributions. The most popular political comedians today have achieved success by emulating practices improvised by Will Rogers. He, too, had multiple outlets for reaching his audience and he mastered popular culture in ways that blazed the trail for modern political humor. Examining a few of his "rules for success" will show how closely contemporary political humorists are following his lead.

1. POSE AS A JOURNALIST

Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have perfected mimicking broadcast news. Stewart anchors the leading fake news show, Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. It's real news and a real show, which explains our fascination, if not its designation as "fake." Stewart routinely comments on the news of the day and interviews newsmakers and other personalities about political issues. A spin-off, *The Colbert Report*, is hosted by Stephen Colbert, who channels his Bill O'Reilly-type persona to mimic the pompous, bombastic pundits who populate cable news shows. He parodies how these TV hosts and political commentators frame the news through their own narrow ideological perspectives.

Many would point to the longstanding *Weekend Update* segment on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) as the birth of this "journalistic" style of American humor. SNL launched many comedic careers from the anchor desk of *Weekend Update*—Chevy Chase, Jane Curtin, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, Dennis Miller, Norm Macdonald, Jimmy Fallon, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Seth Meyers among the notables. Also notable was Macdonald's opening line: "I'm Norm Macdonald, and now the fake news."

David Frost hosted a sort of precursor in the 1960s, a satirical news program called *That Was the Week That Was*. But if we probe further back in time, we find that Will Rogers was there first. Newspapers hired Rogers to "cover" Republican and Democratic national conventions in the 1920s. From that point forward, his writing career was replete with commentary on major political events and Americans clamored to read his "take." As *The New York Times* noted in Rogers's obituary, "His comments on life were widely followed and almost universally quoted. One of the most used American expressions was, 'Did you see what Will Rogers said?'"

2. MIX WITH POLITICIANS

When a humorist achieves a significant degree of popularity, politicians will inevitably want to be associated with that visibility and goodwill. Will Rogers befriended every president from Teddy Roosevelt to Franklin D. Roosevelt and actively campaigned for



Will Rogers and Billie Burke, movie still from *Doubting Thomas*, 1935.

the latter. He formally addressed the Republican and Democratic national conventions and poked fun at both sides of the aisle:

The Republicans mopped up, the Democrats gummed up, and I will now try and sum up. Things are terribly dull now. We won't have any more serious comedy until Congress meets.

A characteristic, often criticized feature of modern presidential politics is the obligatory appearance by candidates on late night talk shows and fake news programs. From the time Bill Clinton played his saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992, making the rounds on these shows has become a political rite of passage.

Even if the politically-minded avoid the late night couch, modern comedians are happy to take their biting humor to the intended target. For example, Stephen Colbert blasted *both* the media and President Bush during the 2006 White House Correspondent's Dinner:

Over the last five years you people were so good—over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out.... Here's how it works: the president makes decisions. He's the Decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again.... Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know—fiction! (*Daily Kos*, April 30, 2006)

For some reason, Colbert's remarks were not widely reported.

WILL ROGERS



Will in Alaska

*Politics is the best show in America.
I am going to keep on enjoying it.*

—Will Rogers

3. SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

The genius of humor often challenges the status quo. Will Rogers delivered potent political criticism deftly hidden in a joke or lighthearted observation. He smoothed the way with his down-home sensibilities delivered with a friendly Okie drawl. Who could be threatened by that? Just before going onstage at a charity benefit, Rogers learned that President Woodrow Wilson would be in the audience. His routine included jokes aimed at the president's foreign policy. Rogers admitted to being "kinder nervous" to the crowd, but finally delivered some of his characteristic criticisms of the administration and what he saw as a lack of preparation for war against Germany. In his wonderful biography, *Will Rogers: A Political Life* (Texas Tech University Press, 2011), Richard D. White, Jr., recounts the scene:

"There is some talk of getting a machine gun if we can borrow one," Rogers began. "The one we have now they are using to train our army with in Plattsburg. If we go to war we will just about have to go to the trouble of getting another gun." Glancing up, Rogers saw the president was leading the laughter.

Not all politicians are gracious about being the butt of a joke, but Wilson set the standard and stopped backstage to meet Rogers after the show.

Among talk show hosts, Jay Leno has directed punch lines fairly evenly across administrations. Like Will Rogers, Leno is fearless, even in close proximity to powerful prey. Just minutes before President Barack Obama would sit in the guest chair for one of many presidential visits to *The Tonight Show*, Leno delivered a zinger in his opening monologue:

President Obama sent John McCain to Cairo to help solve the political problems that brought the Egyptian government to a halt. I've got an idea ... How about solving the problems that brought *our* government to a halt. Why don't we start with that one first? Yeah, that'd be a good idea. (NBC.com, August 6, 2013)

Like Woodrow Wilson, Obama stuck around for an openly happy conversation with Leno.

4. BE SOCIAL—EMBRACE NEW MEDIA

New media technologies are both wondrous and intimidating. Political movements, as we have seen, can galvanize through the use of social media—from the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street to the Arab Spring.

The early twentieth century was also an extraordinary time when communication sparked global

awareness and Will Rogers used new media technologies to full advantage. He was among the first to lend his voice to national radio broadcasts and even made one of the first comedy phonograph records, a compilation of his radio shows. He was a pioneer in the emerging film industry, making dozens of silent films, and was one of the few entertainers who successfully transitioned to “talkies.”

Rogers would have been a master blogger, too, given the chance. He was a world traveler and took along a portable typewriter to write newspaper columns and features—musings on world events and American foreign policy, encounters with world leaders, observations about the emergence of air travel—thoughts that were transmitted around the world.

Obviously Rogers didn’t have a Twitter account, but he mastered its equivalent. In 1926, during one of many trips to Europe, he sent a telegram to *The New York Times* about Lady Astor visiting America. It would become the first of nearly three thousand telegrams—short, pithy observations of news as it happened—that would be published daily in hundreds of newspapers. He sent telegrams like modern celebrities send tweets:

You can pick an American bootlegger out of a crowd of Americans every time. He will be the one that is sober.
Yours temperately, Will Rogers.

It is open season now in Europe for grouse and Americans. They shoot the grouse and put them out of their misery. Yours truly, Will Rogers.

Parliament met today. One member was thrown out. It seemed like Washington.

His sphere of influence grew exponentially as his daily telegram was syndicated to hundreds of newspapers for an audience of *forty million* readers. How many celebrities have that kind of Twitter following? Three. Justin Bieber and Katy Perry have just over forty-six million followers; Lady Gaga, about forty million. Sorry President Obama and Taylor Swift—at spots four and five your influence can’t beat Will Rogers’s.

WILL OF THE PEOPLE

For years [Will Rogers] watched the shifting American scene, noting its movements with flippancy and wisdom. While it is easy to call a spade a spade, he did so and made the spade like it—which is something different. (*The New York Times*, August 17, 1935)

Will Rogers pushed the envelope of political humor, perfecting an ability to connect with the audience while mastering every avenue of media available to him. Modern political humorists, it would seem, are following his philosophy to the letter: “A gag to be any good has to be fashioned about some truth. The rest you get by your slant on it and perhaps by a wee bit of exaggeration, so’s people won’t miss the point.”

He came of age during a time of *broadcasting*; ours is an age of *narrowcasting*. Even so, the most popular political humorists



Will during one of his many radio broadcasts

continue to emulate the tradition of Rogers, making substantial political commentary palatable to large, diverse audiences.

Humor is the surprise of an unexpected truth. It sneaks up on us, bypasses our defenses and, in the best of times, breaks through as laughter. As long as there are politicians, and media to report them, we’ll have political humorists to show us the humanity—and laughter—we all have in common.

DR. BRETT S. SHARP is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Central Oklahoma where he recently inaugurated UCO’s new Master of Public Administration program. He occasionally teaches classes in politics and humor, music in American politics, and other courses concerning the intersection of politics and popular culture. His writings include *Managing in the Public Sector: A Casebook in Ethics and Leadership*, the edited *Oklahoma Government & Politics* now in its fifth edition, and he contributed to *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington*.

EXTRA! Listen to a Will Rogers radio broadcast on politics and compare it to a Jay Leno monologue on President Barack Obama; learn how to whip up a fake news item; link to an online photo gallery and lesson plans on Will Rogers; and read the obituary tribute to Will from *The New York Times*: okhumanities.org/extra

The Witty N. Scott Momaday

That N. Scott Momaday is an artist of note there is no doubt: he's a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, poet, playwright, and painter. Perhaps less well known is his sense of humor. Nothing demonstrates that better—his *sense* and *humor*—than the little ditties he calls epitaphs. According to Momaday, swimming laps keeps the body in shape but is dreadfully dull for the mind. To allay boredom between backstrokes, he began composing epitaphs. Though only two lines long, they require wit and imagination to stay razor sharp. Read on for some ripping good fun.

On Futility

He worked hard and was rewarded.
His reward is here recorded.

On Chastity

Here lies a lady sweet and chaste.
Here lies the matter: chaste makes waste.

Of Ambition

He drove himself, and was undone,
And left no stone unturned but one.

The Death of Beauty

She died a beauty of repute,
Her other virtues in dispute.

And for good measure we add the following—
couplets of *another* kind ...

Planned Parenthood

If coupling should make us whole
And of the selfsame mind and soul,
Then couple let's in celebration;
We have contained the population.

Untitled

(Published here first for our readers!)
Promiscuity was her bane.
And "Free for All" was her refrain.
Then she was summoned to the court
For plying her unholy sport.
"Not guilty!" was her pious plea
By reason of diversity.

Except where noted, poems are from In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-1991 (University of New Mexico Press, 2009), used by permission of the author.

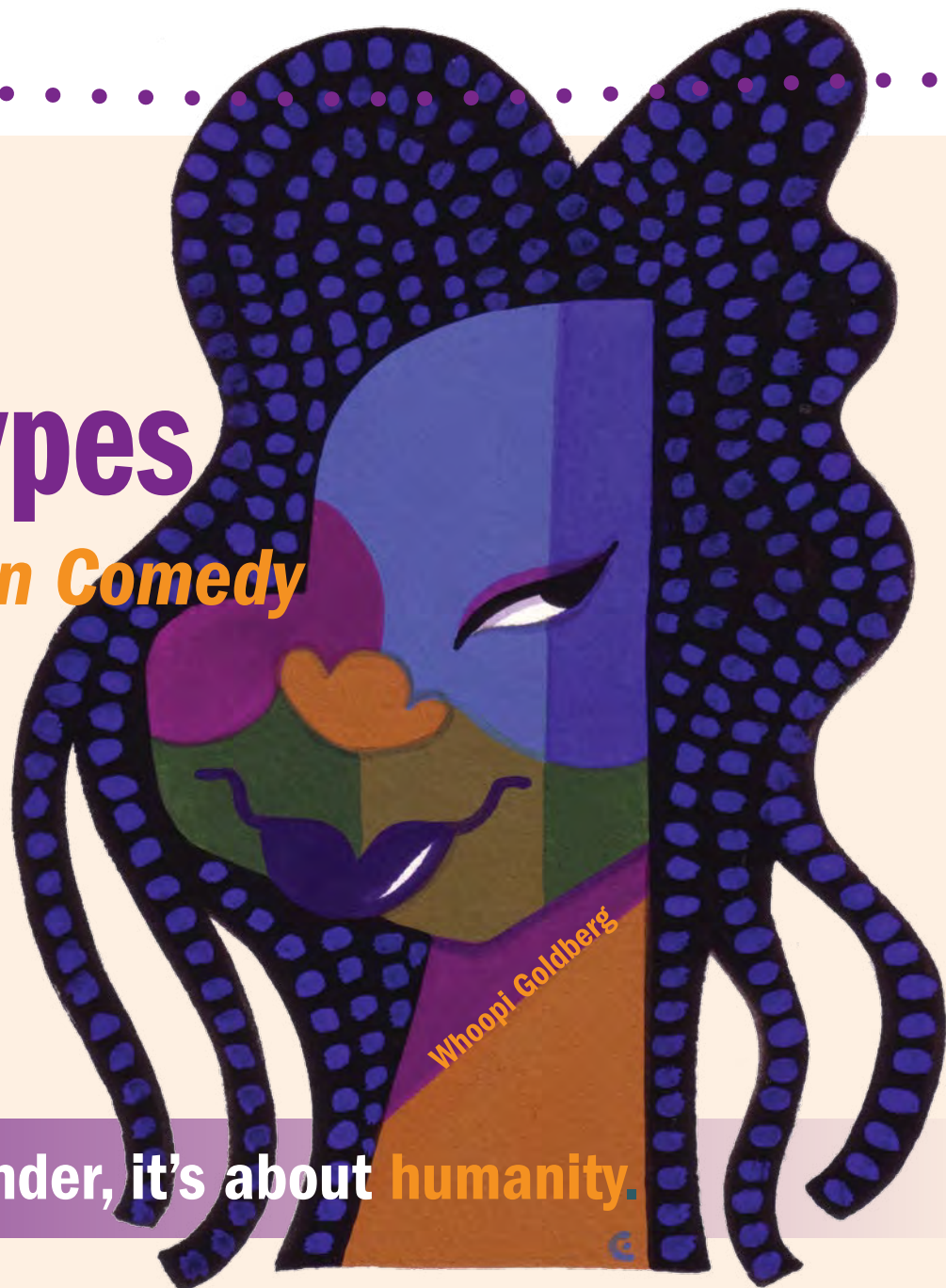


Together, DON HOLLADAY. Don Holladay's work has appeared in numerous solo and group shows across Oklahoma. He also holds a law degree from the University of Oklahoma College of Law. Image photographed by Konrad Eek. donholladay.com

Skirting Stereotypes

—Women in Comedy

By Joanna E. Rapf
Art by David Cowles



It's not about gender, it's about **humanity.**

A forum at my fiftieth reunion at Brown University last May was entitled “A Sense of Humor: Brown Women in Comedy.” The panelists included Brown graduates who had made successful careers in comedy: Marin Hinkle, stage, television, and film actor; Tara Schuster, writer, performer, and producer at Comedy Central; and Suzanne Whang, television host, actor, writer, and stand-up comedian. The comments that Jerry Lewis had just made at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival were the starting point for their lively refutation of his ideas. Asked who his favorite female comics were, Lewis put down the question by mentioning only Cary Grant and Burt Reynolds. He then added: “I don’t have any.”

Lewis is famous for saying in a 1998 interview that “a woman doing comedy doesn’t offend me but sets me back a bit.

I, as a viewer, have trouble with it. I think of her as a producing machine that brings babies in the world.” The remark prompted the audience at the interview to walk out. Asked in May 2013 if performers like Melissa McCarthy and Sarah Silverman had changed his opinion, Lewis essentially said no: “I cannot sit and watch a lady diminish her qualities to the lowest common denominator. I just can’t do that.”

This view that it is unladylike for a woman to indulge in what is known as “broad” comedy, to do slapstick, to be aggressive, to use profanity or joke about sex is behind the notion that women do not have a sense of humor. Lewis defended his ideas in a September 2000 *Larry King Live* interview by saying he is “old-fashioned”: “I still open doors for ladies, I still move a seat under for a lady, and my wife gets the kind of glorious attention that a lady is



Jerry Lewis



Roseanne Barr

entitled to." Although he admits to admiring comedians such as Whoopi Goldberg and the late Lucille Ball, he adds that, "some women comedians make me uncomfortable ... I have a difficult time seeing her do this on stage," making a pumping motion under his armpit.

We can go back to Sigmund Freud for the idea that the male is naturally aggressive and the female is naturally passive. Here is another source for women having no sense of humor. They may be the butt of male jokes, like Margaret Dumont for the Marx Brothers, but they cannot be the ones who make the jokes, who laugh at men, who revel in physicality, drink, belch, and attack social norms. This would violate the sacred nurturing quality of the maternal body.

In an article simply titled, "Why Women Aren't Funny" in *Vanity Fair* (January 2007), the late Christopher Hitchens reiterated Lewis's position that women can't be funny because humor, as Freud clearly established, is aggressive and preemptive. According to Hitchens, women prefer to think of life as "fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is." In the gap between the ideal and the real, comedy reminds us that, "life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste." This is anathema to women, Hitchens suggests, without any supporting evidence other than his rhetorical flamboyance. Women, he says, do not like to indulge in filth. Ignoring the fact that comics such as Sarah Silverman and Margaret Cho can be delightfully filthy or that comics such as Tina Fey can be pretty and heterosexual, he repeats the familiar bromide that to be a woman and to be funny it is necessary to be "hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three." He adds that since humor is a sign of intelligence, it could be that men do not want women to be funny because that would position them as a threat. In this connection, Joan Rivers once facetiously remarked, "Men find funny women threatening. They ask me, 'Are you going to be funny in bed?'"

The origins of comedy are actually female (the word itself comes from a god of fertility, Comus or Komos), connected within fertility rites, celebrating springtime, birth, and renewal, with the idea of enduring, of going on. But in practice comedy has come to be dominated by the male, in part because of its aggressive nature and its connection with power. Frances Gray has astutely observed that, "like sexuality—indeed *with* sexuality—laughter has been closely bound up with power" (*Women and Laughter*, Univ. of Virginia Press, 1994). So it is not that women have lacked a sense of humor, it is that they have lacked power.

Humorists or comedians—there is a distinction, but I am not making it in this article—have always been crucial to the evolution of the humanistic vision of a society. It has traditionally been their role to challenge social and symbolic systems, to illuminate that gap between ideal and real, and, hence, to help bring about progressive change. We think of Mark Twain, Will Rogers, or Jon Stewart to bring the list closer to the present, but the women on this list are harder to find. I would include Dorothy Parker, Nora Ephron, Tina Fey, Carol Burnett (comedy royalty and winner of the 2013 Mark Twain Prize), and many of today's other outstanding stand-ups such as Sarah Silverman, Paula Poundstone, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. Historically, there have been many funny women, from Shakespeare's plays to the screwball heroines of film, Gracie Allen of radio, and, of course, Lucille Ball and Imogene Coca on television. It's worth noting that these women were not funny on their own, but rather as comic foils usually in the presence of a male colleague. No woman has had the opportunity to anchor a series of comic films on her own like Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Jim

Carrey, or Woody Allen. An exception, of course, is Mae West who wrote her own material and did star in a series of extremely successful comedies in the 1930s, but she is an exception. There has been no one like Mae West until television—and specifically cable TV—opened opportunities that were not there before for women to write their own material as well as to perform.

The Brown University panelists sharply condemned Lewis for what they saw as his misogynist remarks and used their own careers, and those of some of the comedians mentioned in this article, as examples of how women can be successful and funny and challenge the status quo. Tara Schuster, a producer at Comedy Central, reminds us that *The Daily Show* was co-created by a woman, Lizz Winstead. Jessica Williams, currently featured on that show, energetically slings barbs at ingrained racism and the proverbial “glass ceiling.” Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show* received extensive publicity in July 2010 when blog posts published on the women’s-interest site Jezebel.com described the show as “a boys’ club where women’s contributions are often ignored and dismissed.” Essentially, the show was accused of being a glorified comedy frat house run by men who didn’t believe a woman could be funny. More than thirty female staff members staunchly refuted the attack in an open letter on its website, TheDailyShow.com. They pointed out that women make up forty percent of the staff and work in all areas of production, both behind and in front of the cameras, concluding: “The truth is, when it comes down to it, *The Daily Show* isn’t a boy’s club or a girl’s club, it’s a family.”

Curiously, in his work if not in his life, Jerry Lewis, who would hardly be called a “feminist” by any of the Brown University panelists, emphasizes family and seems to critique stereotypical views of men and women in his films, either by blurring gender distinctions or parodying them. Comedy is an excellent vehicle for exploring and critiquing stereotypes. Look at the titles of some of Lewis’s films: *The Delicate Delinquent* (1957), *The Geisha Boy* (1958), *Cinderfella* (1960), or *The Ladies Man* (1961). In each of these, he plays a feminized figure. In *The Ladies Man*, he embodies both male and female characteristics, even in his name, *Herbert H. Heebert*, who, in the course of the narrative, comes to a fuller awareness of his suppressed masculinity.

Self-consciousness about gender in these films may suggest, albeit unconsciously, that emphasizing certain characteristics as male and others as female may have unfortunate social repercussions. An excellent example of this is the bumbling and meek Professor Julius Kelp’s hyper-masculinized alter ego, Buddy Love, in *The Nutty Professor* (1963). Love is such an extreme example of the worst kind of male ego and dominance, and the girl, Stella, such an extreme example of pretty blonde female gullibility, that as writer and director Lewis calls our attention to gender stereotypes and how they distort our essential humanity. This is why in a 1993 essay, “Comic Theory from a Feminist Perspective: A Look at Jerry Lewis” (*The Journal of Popular Culture*), I called Lewis an “involuntary

feminist.” And one of the great pleasures of my academic life was when my editor heard from Lewis that he really liked the essay and ordered a number of copies to give to his friends!

To move beyond the issue of gender in a discussion of comedy represents a significant step forward. It is a pleasure to read that comedian Tig Notaro, best known as a stand-up who opened her act with the line, “Good evening! Hello. I have cancer! How are you?” never had a problem with being a woman and being funny. By focusing on her own experiences, she shows how “women’s ability to be funny has nothing to do with their gender and everything to do with their humanity” (*The Huffington Post*, July 11, 2013). We all share illness, doubt, failure, heartbreak, and death, to mention some favorite comic themes.

In his book, *The Total Film-Maker* (Random House, 1971), Lewis has written that comedy is our safety valve. Were it not for our sense of humor, we could not survive emotionally.



Laughter is a way of coping with our imperfections, our mistakes, and the fact that fate so often deals us an unfair hand. Comedy can be subversive, disarming, a nonviolent assertion of power, but in today's multimedia world, both men and women can wield it equally well.

JOANNA E. RAPF is Professor of English and Film & Media Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Her most recent book—this one with Andrew Horton, also of OU—is *A Companion to Film Comedy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

DAVID COWLES is an internationally known illustrator and animation director. His illustrations have appeared in *Entertainment Weekly*, *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, and *The New York Times*, among others. He has worked on animated projects for Toyota, Sesame Workshop, Playhouse Disney, and *They Might Be Giants*. davidcowles.net or davidcowlesillustrations.tumblr.com

EXTRA! Watch video on Lucille Ball, read Jerry Lewis interview transcripts, and connect to materials on Jewish women comedienne—from Fanny Brice to Gilda Radner: okhumanities.org/extra



Cultural Center
THEATER
 Calendar of Events
Film Festival
 Poetry Slam UNIVERSITY
ART EXHIBIT
Public Radio
 Corporate Sponsor
MUSEUM TOUR
MFA PROGRAM
MAIN STREET EVENT
PUBLIC TELEVISION
 MUSIC FESTIVAL BOOK PUBLISHER
 Symphony
HISTORIC TOURISM
 Writing Workshop

Your Ad Here!

OUR AUDIENCE – YOUR MARKET

Be a part of our award-winning team.
 Advertising is limited—*so your ad stands out!*
Oklahoma HUMANITIES magazine has a print circulation of 10,000 and full issues are posted on our website.

Rates and guidelines:
okhumanities.org/publications
 Contact Traci Jinkens:
traci@okhumanities.org or 405/235-0280

We depend on your generosity.

Oklahoma HUMANITIES magazine is just one avenue for the Oklahoma Humanities Council's mission *to promote meaningful public engagement with the humanities*. OHC programs and grants bring people together through book groups, exhibits, film festivals, discussion forums, and more. If you value the power of humanities education and cultural opportunities to strengthen your community, please make a contribution to support this important work.

Giving is easy: Send a check or pledge in the donation envelope in this magazine or use your credit card on our secure website: okhumanities.org (click on the green DONATE tab)

Matching Gifts: Ask your employer if your gift is eligible for their charitable gift-matching program.

Gifts of Stock: Transfer shares to the Council and avoid capital gains tax on appreciated stocks.

Leave a Legacy: Name the Council in your will or ask us about planning a deferred gift that can offer tax advantages and an income stream during your lifetime. For information, contact Traci Jinkens at (405) 235-0280 or traci@okhumanities.org



View our complete profile at
GiveSmartOKC
 Know More. Give More.
GiveSmartOKC.org

In Defense of Typos, Creative Spelling, & General Proofreading Tomfoolery

By Viki Craig

I love reading the “Police Notes” in my local newspaper. One day, in a quick survey of recent police calls, I noted a complaint about “parking dogs.” What an image: a Chihuahua angle parking a Mini-Cooper. Or a poodle trying to parallel park a Prius. It’s not just the “Police Notes.” At lunch in a downtown bistro today the wine list boasted an extra-special “Marlot” next to another red wine under the “Barfoot” label.

I have to admit the most fertile field for these strange communications lies in my academic work and essays from our freshmen. The departmental secretary tells of one in which the young writer stated he put his girlfriend on a “pedalstool.” A cross between a barstool and a unicycle? Now there’s a balancing act. In a prompt to write about an important event in his life, a student recounted the first dinner with this girlfriend’s parents, ending the evening, he said, “in *bondage* with them.” He seemed greatly relieved at the outcome. Me, not so much.

These gems are great for a giggle as I grade. Some positively befuddle me. They don’t “furiate” me, as one student wrote, although I rather like that strange, truncated verb. I also enjoyed the young woman who shared, “At the altar the couple exchanged their *vowels*.” I’ve got U, babe.

A university librarian reported a research-related incident. A perplexed young scholar complained that she had searched and searched for information on a topic assigned by a humanities teacher. The librarian asked where she had searched—all of the expected places, it turned out. Then he asked the girl for her topic. “Something called the *Dead Sea Squirrels*.”

Some of the best stories come out of those auditory miscues. Like the freshman who went to the university bookstore. He finally got the clerk’s attention and asked, “Can you tell me where I can find the catharsis shelved?” The clerk stifled a laugh and helped him find a thesaurus.

One final story on mishearing and misunderstandings. Years ago a former colleague was teaching at a Texas coastal college. In the main, her students were young people fresh from high school, but she had a few returning,

non-traditional students. She was teaching Thoreau’s famous essay, widely known as “Civil Disobedience.” They had just considered the lines, “I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion.”

One student asked, “Miss B., does that mean that when we want to walk on the grass and we see signs telling us not to do that, we should ignore them?”

My friend considered. “Well, I suppose if there is no discernible harm, maybe you should ignore the signs.”

“Then would you call yourself an anarchist or at least say you have anarchical leanings?”

“Yes, I probably do,” my friend responded.

One of the returning students, a middle-aged woman who had never uttered so much as one word in class, jumped to her feet, gathered papers, books, pen, and purse in a clatter of activity, lasered my colleague with a withering look and stomped up the aisle, slamming the door behind her. It was hard to say who was more shocked, my friend or her students. When the class was over, my friend headed for her office, only to be accosted by the chairperson.

“Miss B., would you please come to my office? We need to talk.”

She followed meekly and sat where he indicated on the other side of his desk. The chairperson liked a bit of drama, so my friend fidgeted as he went through the motions of lighting and puffing on his pipe.

Finally he spoke. “Now, Miss B., what is this I hear about your calling yourself the Antichrist?”

The returning student never returned. (Pun intended.)

Why do I defend typos, fractured syntax, miscues, creative spelling, and the confusion these create? After forty-three years of reading student papers and observing our general vagaries with written and oral literacy, of one thing I’m certain. Job security. And I love a good laugh. Keep it up, guys.



Ringling Brothers Would Be Proud, DIANA J. SMITH. An Oklahoma native, Diana J. Smith received a BFA in painting from the University of Oklahoma. Diana has exhibited in numerous juried, group, and solo shows and has won many awards for her paintings, masks, and mixed media figures. Diana enjoys pure abstraction, but is best known for her paintings of canines, enlivening her subjects with qualities of loyalty, humor, inquisitiveness, and patience. dianajsmith.com

VIKI CRAIG teaches freshman English, English Ed methods, and American, diversity, and young adult literature courses at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. She has published in a variety of genres, including non-fiction prose, fiction (short story and novel), and poetry.

A Brief History of African American Humor

By Gerald Early

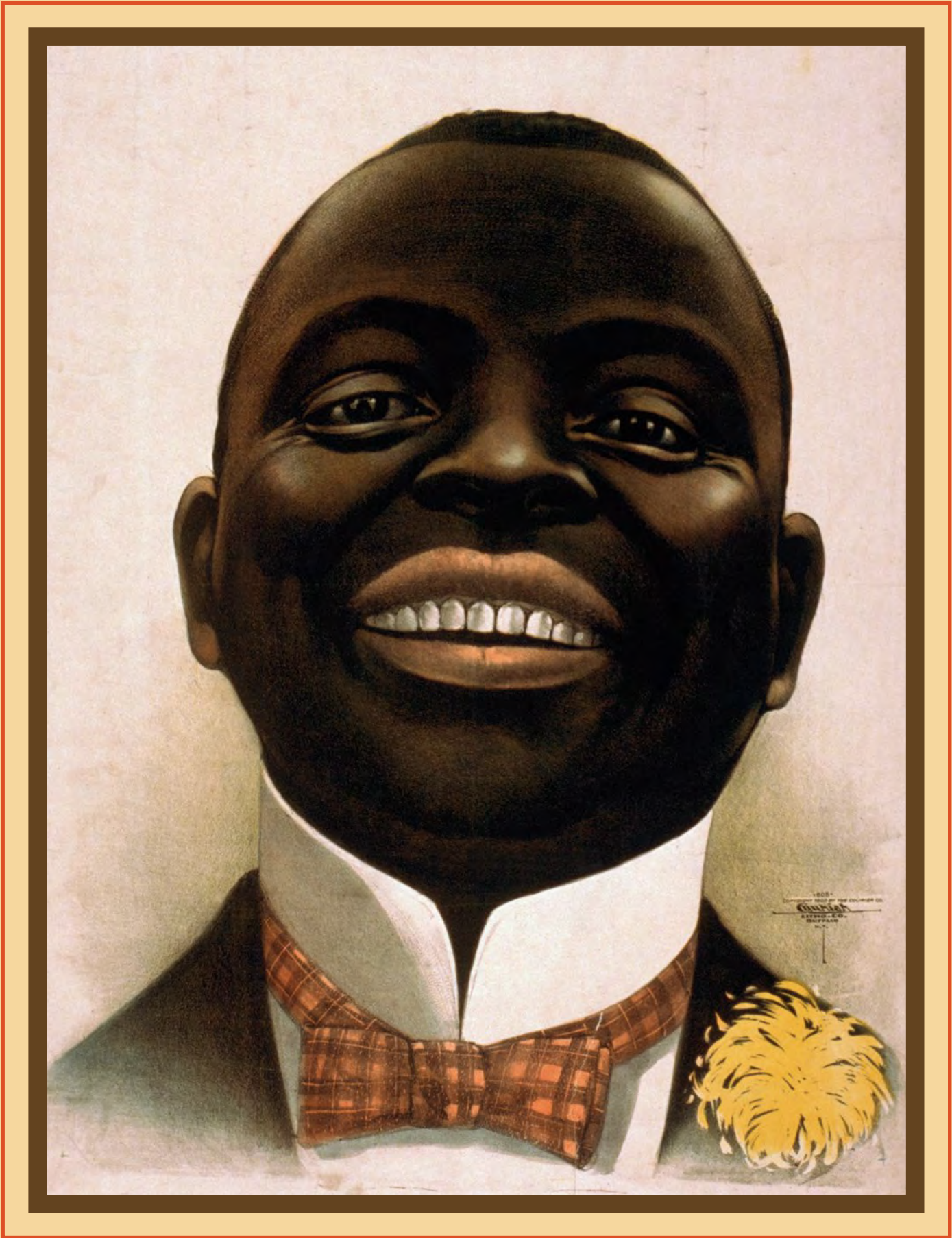
The assistant director at the humanities center I supervise is a Chinese woman who grew up in Beijing and did not come to the United States until the 1980s. Despite being an American citizen, she still deeply identifies with China. Once she wanted to prove a point to me about the cultural nature of humor, so she translated a popular urban Chinese joke. She thought it was hilarious. Not only did I not get it, it seemed incomprehensible. That was the point she was trying to prove: in our global world, humor is something that does not translate well. “Every group has its humor,” she said, “and understanding that humor determines whether you are an insider or an outsider.”

Humor is an important creative act that binds a group together, gives it an identity, and defines its view of itself and the world outside itself. In the United States, a country that seems at times unsure about assimilation versus pluralism, group humor is complex in its function and meaning. A group’s humor might contain elements of self-hatred as well as elements of self-protection. How can an outsider understand this if people in the group do not themselves fully understand the complexity of their humor and, as might be the case with many in the group, do not like the humor of their group?

Much commentary has been written about racial humor in the United States. It is a rich subject with a history dating back to nineteenth-century minstrelsy, which gave us a complex intergroup humor of white performers pretending to be comically stereotyped versions of blacks. When, after the Civil War, this form of entertainment finally permitted black performers, they, too, had to act in the traditions of the art, playing comically stereotyped blacks. Black comic performers like George Walker and Bert Williams, who became an enormously successful team, performed what would be called “coon” roles. Perhaps this sort of work caused these blacks some angst—doubtless, it gave them a particular sense of irony—but it may not have been as distressing as many of us today think that it was. Black audiences have always found the popular stereotypes of themselves to be quite funny, in a certain context. Williams and Walker and early black musical stage composers were popular with both black and white audiences. (Think of how Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong, the two most popular jazz musicians among whites during the 1930s, used humor to sell the music.) With so much of the history of black humor rooted in slavery and minstrelsy, it is no wonder that blacks are ambivalent or deeply divided about what the group should think is funny.

The problem in America with group humor is not that outsiders won't get the joke you make about your own group but that they will get the joke at your expense.

Take the great black comic actor Stepin Fetchit (1902-1985), who rose to great heights as a character actor in the late 1920s and 1930s. When Fetchit became popular with white audiences, black commentators, civil rights leaders, and black intellectuals began to condemn him as politically retrograde, as a horrible stereotype of the “Old Negro.” But Lincoln Perry, who created the character of Stepin Fetchit, for years honed his act in front of black audiences who rolled in the aisles laughing. They loved him when he was performing in all-black venues. He performed the same act in Hollywood films and became one of the most criticized men in the national black community. Why? All Lincoln Perry was trying to do was take an ethnic character and make it cross over to wider audiences as an American type, not unlike the Yankee Peddler or the American backwoodsman.



Does this image engage you—or shock you? Imagine yourself among early twentieth-century minstrel show audiences. This poster is among the most elegant artwork created in the period. See the range of minstrel poster art—from shocking to sophisticated—at the Library of Congress website: loc.gov/pictures (enter “minstrel poster” in the search box). *Minstrel show poster*. Lithograph created by Courier Litho. Co., Buffalo, NY, c. 1900. Library of Congress, D625, U.S. Copyright Office.



Egbert Austin Williams (1874-1922). Bert Williams, one of the most successful black performers in the age of minstrel shows, posed for a professional actor's photo and as he performed in blackface makeup and costume. When black performers were allowed to join minstrel acts, they too had to adopt the blackface makeup used by white performers to carry off the farce comedy and stereotype perceptions of the time. Photos by Samuel Lumiere. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-64934 and LC-USZ62-64924.

The problem was that blacks thought whites were laughing for different reasons. Fetchit, like minstrelsy, politicized laughter. He posed a difficult question: what exactly made him funny to his audiences? The problem in America with group humor is not that outsiders won't get the joke you make about your own group but that they will get the joke at your expense.

The popular, long-running radio comedy *Amos and Andy* caused both similar and somewhat different dilemmas. Premiering in 1928, the show was created by two white actors, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, who portrayed African American migrants. The show was very popular with black listeners. Indeed, when the actors made personal appearances, blacks would turn out along with the show's legions of white fans. The actors appeared in black-face in publicity photos and also in a 1930 movie called *Check and Double Check*, where they looked very odd in scenes with actual black actors. People accepted them as Amos and Andy.

In 1931, Robert Vann, publisher of the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*, began a campaign to have *Amos and Andy* removed from the air because he felt its characterizations of low-class blacks were repellent and insulting. Here, again, the racial politics of comedy were implicated: if blacks and whites both laughed at a stereotyped black character, they could not be laughing for the same reason; and whites, almost certainly, could be laughing only because this sort of comedy reinforced their sense of superiority. In addition, whites played these roles, which only emphasized the denigrating minstrel roots of *Amos and Andy*. The campaign was not successful, but it did divide the

black community about the show. This division between the black elites, who hated the program, and everyday blacks, who were less inclined to take offense, reemerged when *Amos and Andy* was broadcast as a television show in the early 1950s, when it featured black actors in all the roles. Although the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had not joined the *Pittsburgh Courier* in its protest against the radio program, it did actively lead the charge against the television program. The NAACP was successful, and the show was canceled after two years despite enjoying good ratings.

By the early 1950s, black actors generally avoided comic roles. The major black actors who emerged in this period—Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, James Edwards, Ruby Dee, and Dorothy Dandridge—did not do comedy, possibly because Hollywood was afraid to cast them in such roles but probably because the actors felt comedy carried the taint of minstrelsy. These black actors felt themselves to be the children of Paul Robeson, and they were highly sensitive to the idea of playing demeaning roles. And nothing demeaned a serious black actor quite like comedy, especially when it meant being funny for a white audience.

Many people, especially those who have never watched the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*, are convinced that Hattie McDaniel's Oscar-winning role of Mammy, the stereotypical overweight, nurturing, bossy slave woman, was a comic role, not the dramatic role it actually was. Louise Beavers's Mammy-like performance in the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life* was also largely a dramatic, not

GEORGE THATCHER'S GREATEST MINSTRELS



George Thatcher's Greatest Minstrels, "Hello! My Baby." The Strobridge Litho. Co., Cincinnati & New York, c. 1899. As offensive as we find its message today, this poster typifies minstrel show advertisements of the period and presents the stereotypical views whites held of African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: exaggerated features ("blacks are comical"); colorful clothing ("they are frivolous"); musical instruments ("they have natural performing talents"); dice ("they are prone to gambling"); watermelon and chicken ("their favorite foods"); and a basket of charcoal and packet of lampblack ("the tools of blackface").



Portrait of Harry Belafonte, singing, February 18, 1954. Library of Congress, Carl Van Vechten Collection, LC-USZ62-103726



Portrait of Ethel Waters, August 29, 1938. Library of Congress, Carl Van Vechten Collection, LC-USZ62-115134

comic, role. These were the two most substantial roles for black actors appearing in Hollywood films before World War II, and while both films attracted black audiences, the films were meant for whites. Thus, black audiences felt uncomfortable with the black roles, sensing that they were more comic than they actually were.

Lena Horne, endorsed by Walter White of the NAACP as the antidote to black servile comic actors, starred in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, musical motion pictures that were produced in 1943, had primarily black casts, and were made to appeal to African Americans. One of Horne's roles was clearly comic—the sexy black temptress, another stereotype that would ensnare Dorothy Dandridge in the 1950s. Black audiences felt more comfortable with the humorous stereotypes in films made explicitly for them. (After World War II, Ethel Waters would replace Hattie McDaniel playing “Mammy” roles, and singer/dancer Pearl Bailey would become a new comic voice as the sassy, outspoken black woman, a sort of black Eve Arden.) The political issues involved in the depiction of blacks in film for both black and white audiences and for black actors were so complicated, so fraught with hazard, that the line between what was comic and what was dramatic was blurred.

More than a little controversy arose among blacks when Poitier and Dandridge agreed to play the leads in Otto Preminger's 1959 film version of *Porgy and Bess*, roles that neither Poitier nor Dandridge wanted to do because they felt the characters were racial stereotypes. The fact that *Porgy and Bess* is not a comedy but an important opera (the only performable opera featuring blacks in all major roles) was probably the only reason these black actors agreed to play in it at all.

In light of all of this, Bill Cosby emerged in the 1960s as an extraordinarily important figure in American entertainment. When he was given a lead role in the television series *I Spy*,

he became the first African American to star in a dramatic series. However, Cosby had come to the attention of the public as a stand-up comic. From 1962 to 1965 he rose rapidly, playing all the noted comedy clubs and releasing a hit comedy album, *Bill Cosby Is a Very Funny Fellow ... Right*, in 1964. Cosby was one of three important black stand-up comics to appear in the 1960s who were very different from the black comics who had existed before. The other two were Dick Gregory and boxer Muhammad Ali. All three were “clean” comics in the sense that they did not aim their material at an adult audience by using obscene language or discussing sex. Each was the result of the civil rights movement.

Early in his career, Ali became a juvenile comic, reciting humorous verse as a way of bringing attention to his boxing matches. He even recorded an album of such poetry for Columbia Records in 1963, with liner notes by poet Marianne Moore. When he joined the Nation of Islam shortly before his 1964 title bout with champion Sonny Liston, his comic antics took on a much more political edge. For a time, Ali's comedy bothered many sportswriters and boxing fans because it made it seem as if he did not take his sport seriously. Blacks were also bothered in the early days of Ali's career because they felt his comedy was demeaning and made Ali look silly in comparison to the great race hero Joe Louis, who never joked and rarely smiled publicly.

Gregory, who made the civil rights movement and race part of his routine of acerbic, wry observations on American cultural and political hypocrisy, belonged to a school of liberal, Cold War political comics of the day that included Mort Sahl, Tom Lehrer, and Vaughn Meader. Ali combined elements of Jerry Lewis with the comic bragging of Depression-era baseball pitcher Dizzy Dean; and Ali racialized their types of comedy in a new way, making their white audiences aware that they were speaking as black men. Of



Pearl Bailey in *St. Louis Woman*, 1946. Library of Congress, Carl Van Vechten Collection, LC-USZ62-116995



Paul Robeson as "Othello" in a Theatre Guild Production, Broadway, ca. 1943-1944, Library of Congress LC-USW33-054944-ZC

course, Williams and Walker, Stepin Fetchit, and Amos and Andy were also making their audiences aware that they were "black men," but Ali and Gregory were self-aware and were not making humor that could in any way make whites laugh at the spectacle of their own degradation.

Cosby never made a point of reminding his audiences that he was black. He avoided being political—to the point of not even casually mentioning political figures of the time—and this probably had a great deal to do with his enormous success. Nipsey Russell and Flip Wilson, both successful crossover black comics of the day, generally avoided politics as well.

Cosby was not a bridge figure when it came to bringing a version of black stand-up comedy off the "Chitlin' Circuit" of black theaters and urban venues, where a constellation of black comics—including Moms Mabley, Pigmeat Markham, Redd Foxx, and Skillet and Leroy—normally performed for black audiences. Although some of Mabley's and Markham's recordings for Chess Records were given radio airplay, by and large these were adult comics whose routines were far too raunchy for children. Cosby's comedy, which he mostly performed for integrated or largely white audiences, was not closely related to what these black comics performed for black audiences. The form of black comedy seen on the Chitlin' Circuit would be exposed to wider audiences in the 1970s through the crossover success of Redd Foxx, and many of his comic peers would appear on his hit television show, *Sanford and Son*, where they performed cleaned-up, watered-down versions of their acts. Neither blacks nor whites seemed troubled by this, and the show was popular with both groups, although some more-militant black intellectuals condemned the show as minstrelsy.

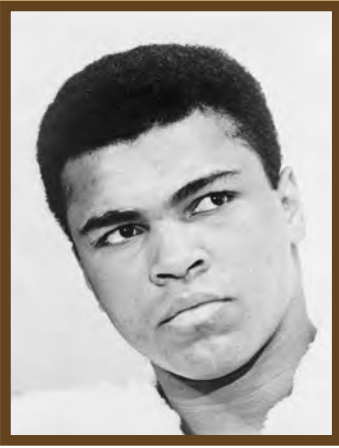
During and after the civil rights years, Marxist and nationalist blacks regularly condemned most black comedy as a form of minstrelsy, in effect saying that blacks could never escape

these stereotypes and that making whites laugh was politically disempowering and socially degrading.

Bill Cosby was, in effect, a middlebrow comedian. His routines about growing up in a normal American family and being an American dad made not only Cosby but also a fantasy image of the black family mainstream in the days of both Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report on black family pathology (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*) and such television comedies about white families as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, many African Americans, in their militancy and their quest for cultural authenticity, were more apt to feel that Chitlin' Circuit humor was an honest and compelling expression of blackness and would aggressively identify with it.

During the age of integration, from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, black performers and black audiences were freed from certain types of confinement that dictated how they were expected to relate to the larger white world around them. Black performers did not necessarily have to do race-based acts or make use of comic racial stereotypes. Black audiences felt more comfortable with this form of group humor being performed for white audiences. In fact, black audiences were sometimes visibly proud of this.

In the 1970s, Richard Pryor arrived as the major black comic of the day. Indeed, Pryor became one of the seminal stand-up comics of post-World War II America. Although Pryor started out in the 1960s very much in the vein of Bill Cosby, doing mainstream, television-safe comedy, he had shifted by the early 1970s, when he began to use obscenity in his work. This was around the time that George Carlin, a white stand-up comic who became a major figure as well, changed his act from mainstream to edgy by incorporating profane language.



Muhammad Ali, 1967, photo by Ira Rosenberg for the *New York World-Telegram & Sun*. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-115435



Dick Gregory in a telephone interview, 1964, photo by Herman Hiller for the *New York World-Telegram & Sun*. Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-121425

For both comics, profane language was used not so much to deliver raunchy jokes but to be political, antibourgeois, and anti-establishment. Pryor, in effect, became the anti-Bill Cosby. And although Pryor was enormously popular, he faced a backlash from some blacks who were especially disturbed by his excessive use of the [n-word]. W. E. B. Du Bois, in a 1942 article about black humor and black audiences, wrote, "The use of the word '[n—r],' which no white man must use, is coupled with innuendo and suggestion which brings irresistible gales of laughter." So, Pryor was following a tradition in black humor and, in becoming the anti-Bill Cosby, was in many respects reinventing an older black-comic practice for contemporary audiences. Indeed, the fact that Pryor attracted a large white audience in addition to appealing to blacks may have had something to do with the black press criticizing his use of the word. (In the 1920s and 1930s, segments of the black public criticized filmmaker Oscar Micheaux for using the word in his all-black cast films; some strenuously criticized Paul Robeson for appearing in the film version of *Emperor Jones* (1933), where the n-word was used several times.)

The backlash against Pryor was part of a larger dissatisfaction among many blacks with the new, gritty, ghetto image of blacks that was portrayed in popular culture, especially in blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), and *Black Caesar* (1973). But it should not be assumed that this response was largely from the educated black middle class. Some were opposed to it, but many in this group were among Pryor's biggest fans. Working-class, black church folk, black Muslims, older blacks, and blacks in the "uplift trade," as it might be called, were among those who strongly opposed blaxploitation cinema as romanticizing black pathology and being a poor influence on black adolescents. This debate would return with a vengeance with the emergence of rap, particularly gangsta rap, in the 1980s and 1990s.

As nearly all blaxploitation films were ultra-violent and action-oriented, comedy became, ironically, an antidote. Bill Cosby appeared in a series of clean comic films directed by Sidney Poitier—*Uptown Saturday Night* (1974), *Let's Do It Again* (1975), and *A Piece of the Action* (1977)—that were meant to combat blaxploitation cinema. Who would have thought that a family-oriented message of racial uplift would now be found in black comedy and that someone like Sidney Poitier—the ultra-serious, dignified black

actor of the 1950s and 1960s—would direct comic black films? Bill Cosby's clean comedy of the 1960s made it possible for blacks to do comedy and still maintain their sense of racial pride—not to be the objects of laughter at their own expense. Indeed, these films enabled blacks to reconstruct their humor of the era of Walker and Williams without the tint of degradation. In fact, these comedies even made fun of blaxploitation films themselves.

By the late 1970s blacks were divided over the image of blacks in popular culture and in comedy in ways that were similar to the divide blacks felt about Stepin Fetchit, comic actress Hattie McDaniel, and *Amos and Andy*. This divide continues to persist. The more things change, as the old saying goes, the more they remain the same. But as any good historian will note, this was not quite the same at all. No conflict is ever repeated the same way, if only because the actors always change and so does the audience.

GERALD EARLY is Director of the Center for the Humanities and Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University in St. Louis, and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the editor of several volumes, including *This is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2003), and is the author of *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Ecco Press), which won the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism. The preceding article is excerpted from "A Brief History of African American Humor" by Gerald Early, published in the Summer 2010 *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. Used by permission of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

EXTRA! Find interviews on blackface minstrelsy, audio clips of Moms Mabley comedy, reading suggestions, and a teacher's guide: okhumanities.org/extra

CELEBRATING ALLAN HOUSER
AN OKLAHOMA PERSPECTIVE

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of artist Allan Houser's birth, a first-ever, statewide collaboration of Oklahoma museums and cultural institutions, in conjunction with the Oklahoma Museums Association, are honoring his memory, works and legacy. Special exhibitions, events and educational opportunities are available across Oklahoma now through 2014.

OKHOUSER.ORG



A Word that Changed the World

By Steve Heller

In comedy, and in life, timing is everything.

As far as I can tell, there's only one rule for writing comedy based on one's own life: Humiliate yourself. Before readers can draw their critical swords, fall on your own—and on the way down, look as ridiculously mortal as you truly are. The words "ridiculous" and "mortal" are more than companionable modifiers here; they're bound together as essentially as humor and pathos. Without the presence of both, neither seems sufficiently real. Something essential is missing.

For me, the basis of humor is the natural human desire to escape pain. Suspense, the anticipation of pain, is an important part of any comic endeavor. Timing is crucial, of course, whether we're talking about burlesque or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The principal comic tool of burlesque was the slapstick: a device comprised of a handle and two thin, wide paddles connected by a hinge. On stage, a clown in baggy pants encounters a field of daisies. As he bends over to sniff a blossom, a second clown sneaks up behind him with a slapstick. Tempted by the easy target, the second clown winds up like Babe Ruth about to knock a slow curve ball out of Yankee Stadium, and the audience smiles in anticipation. His motions are exaggerated, but the width of the first paddle prevents it from traveling swiftly. It lands softly on the first clown's behind. An instant later, however, the second paddle, traveling faster, smacks the hard surface of the first paddle with a *POW!* The wood-on-wood collision, combined with the exaggerated reaction of the first clown who propels himself off his own feet as if struck by a city bus, creates the illusion of a violent blow. The viewer's escape from the imaginary pain produces laughter: the jolly we-are-all-actually-safe-here release of melodrama.

But what if the pain the audience anticipates is real, the kind of pain they might experience in their own lives, any given day—not corporeal pain but emotional pain, the fear of being embarrassed,

humiliated, exposed? What if the character about to suffer, on stage or in the pages of a book, isn't a clown in baggy pants but someone who, no matter how absurd or ridiculous the situation, somehow reminds the audience of themselves? What kind of laughter does that kind of escape produce? And how does it resonate?

In search of the answers, I will now fall on my sword . . .

A new word is like a new member of your extended family: someone who's been around longer than you have, perhaps, a distant cousin. Perhaps you've heard tell of him from your mother or your uncle or even a stranger, but you've never actually met face-to-face. Perhaps he'll be your friend or perhaps he'll be difficult. Perhaps he'll even change the world as you know it.

The most memorable occasion when a new member of my own linguistic family knocked my world out of its familiar orbit was the Oklahoma High School Extemporaneous Speaking Contest held at Central State University in 1965, my sophomore year. Three members of my speech class were selected to represent Yukon High School: My farm boy friend Phil Maune, a girl named Laura who raised Shetland ponies (and looked like one herself), and me. Several dozen other high schools were also competing, so on an otherwise perfectly good Saturday morning, the CSU campus

was infested with a plague of pock-faced twerps. The rules of the competition were simple: We each drew a random topic exactly ten minutes before we were scheduled to speak. Speeches lasted no more than three minutes. Trading of topics among teammates was not allowed.

This was not debate; none of us had researched any topics in advance. Frankly, none of us on the YHS team knew what the hell we were doing. Our speech teacher, Miss Ratliff, a sweet, silver-haired lady who liked to talk about parasols and horseless carriages, hadn't even allowed us to give off-the-cuff speeches in class. *A public speaker should always know what he is talking about before he speaks* was her rule. That was fine until Miss Ratliff got sick and missed almost an entire month of class. Her substitute, the backup Driver's Ed teacher whose name I've forgotten, followed Miss Ratliff's syllabus precisely. Meanwhile, the principal, Mr. Graves, desiring to increase Yukon High's profile in something

besides sports, entered the three of us in the state contest for the one thing we did not know how to do. So here we were on a Saturday morning in Edmond, Oklahoma, lost in space.

"God, I'm glad that's over," Phil said when he emerged from the dull white room where we would each speak consecutively, with no audience other than the judges. Laura had given her speech first, on "contemporary manners," then immediately disappeared into the lady's room to throw up.

"What was your topic?" I asked Phil.

"Capital punishment. What's yours?"

In my fist I squeezed the white piece of paper I had just drawn from the woman in the tweed jacket, sitting at the little table right outside the speech room. "Abortion."

"Whoa," Phil said. "That's a good one. I wish I'd drawn that."

I nodded. "It's a good one, all right."

This was March of 1965. I was fifteen years old. I'd neither read nor heard the word "abortion" before. I had no idea what it meant.

I checked my watch: Nine minutes until my speech.

"Where are the friggin' pop machines?" Phil asked.

I pointed down the hall to a small lounge area where our sponsor, the substitute Driver's Ed guy, was sipping soda with a teacher from another school. "I'm gonna go get myself ready," I told Phil, and turned in the opposite direction. By the time I'd taken half a dozen steps, my heart was slamming against my chest. "Breathe normal," I instructed myself. "Don't hyperventilate."

I entered the first door that looked like an office rather than a classroom. I was in luck: Even though it was Saturday, a blue-haired secretary sat behind a desk.

"Excuse me," I said in my politest, calmest voice.

The woman smiled up at me. "Yes?"

"Do you have a dictionary?"

"A what?"

"A *dictionary*. You know, the big book with all the words in it?"

The smile vanished. "I know what a dictionary is, young man."

"Sorry. I'm just in a hurry."

"Well, I'm sorry too; the student assistant has ours. All the other offices in the building are closed, I'm afraid. If I were you, I'd try the library."

Breathe normal. "Where's the library?"

She pointed out her window toward a large building across the quad.

"Thanks." *I'll never make it*, I thought as I turned on my heels.

I was always a pretty good runner, though, and by the time I reached the library I still had five minutes left.

"Where are the dictionaries?" I shrieked at the woman at the circulation desk.

"Lower your voice, please. The library has dictionaries on every floor. What kind do you need?"

"What *kind*? Regular . . . Super regular."

She gave me an irritated look, then jerked her thumb sideways like she was hitching a ride. "That way."

I hurried down the hallway until I found myself inside what was obviously the map room. Maps on tables, maps on walls, maps rolled on rods, racked on shelves. I was about to try the next room when next to a map of the Soviet Union I found a slim volume, about the size of a *National Geographic*. It was ring-bound and in retrospect it looked more like a student project than a real book.



The black and white cover read: *Dictionary of Cartography*. Quickly I flipped through the "A's": Axis (go back) . . . Ambit . . . Altitude . . . Alignment . . . Acclivity . . . Abyss . . .

"Where the *hell* is it?"

"Can I help you?"

The sudden voice of the librarian made me jump. "Yes, please." By this time I was so desperate I asked her straight out: "I'm trying to look up the word 'abortion.'"

The woman lifted an eyebrow and looked me up and down for a moment. Then she fixed her eyes on the book. "I don't think you'll find it in there. If I were you, I'd try a regular dictionary."

"I *know*, but where are the regular ones at?"

"Actually, we have dictionaries on every floor. Let me see, the nearest one . . ."

As she looked around the room, I glanced at my watch. Two minutes.

"Thank you, never mind," I said, and walked as swiftly I could toward the exit.

In the dull white room in the ugly red brick building, they were already calling my name.

"Mr. Steve Keller from Yukon High?"

"It's *Heller*," I said, panting as I hurried toward the front. As I took my place behind the podium, I realized my blue sport coat had rings of sweat under the armpits. I thought about taking it off, then realized that would be worse. The room was empty except for myself and three judges, who were seated together immediately in front. They looked like the three wise men of Bethlehem, even though one of them was a woman.

"Your topic is 'abortion'," the judge with a goatee said. "You have three minutes. You may begin at any time."

"OK," I replied slowly, trying to catch my breath. "Here goes . . ."

I took a wild guess that "abortion" had something to do with the Reconstruction of Europe after World War II, a subject I'd actually studied, although at the moment I couldn't remember anything about it. But what if I was wrong? If I started talking about specific countries after Hitler and everything, they'd be on to me right away. So I decided to keep it general.

"Abortion is one of the most serious issues of our time," I began. "Abortion affects every single one of us. All Americans should be concerned about this important subject."

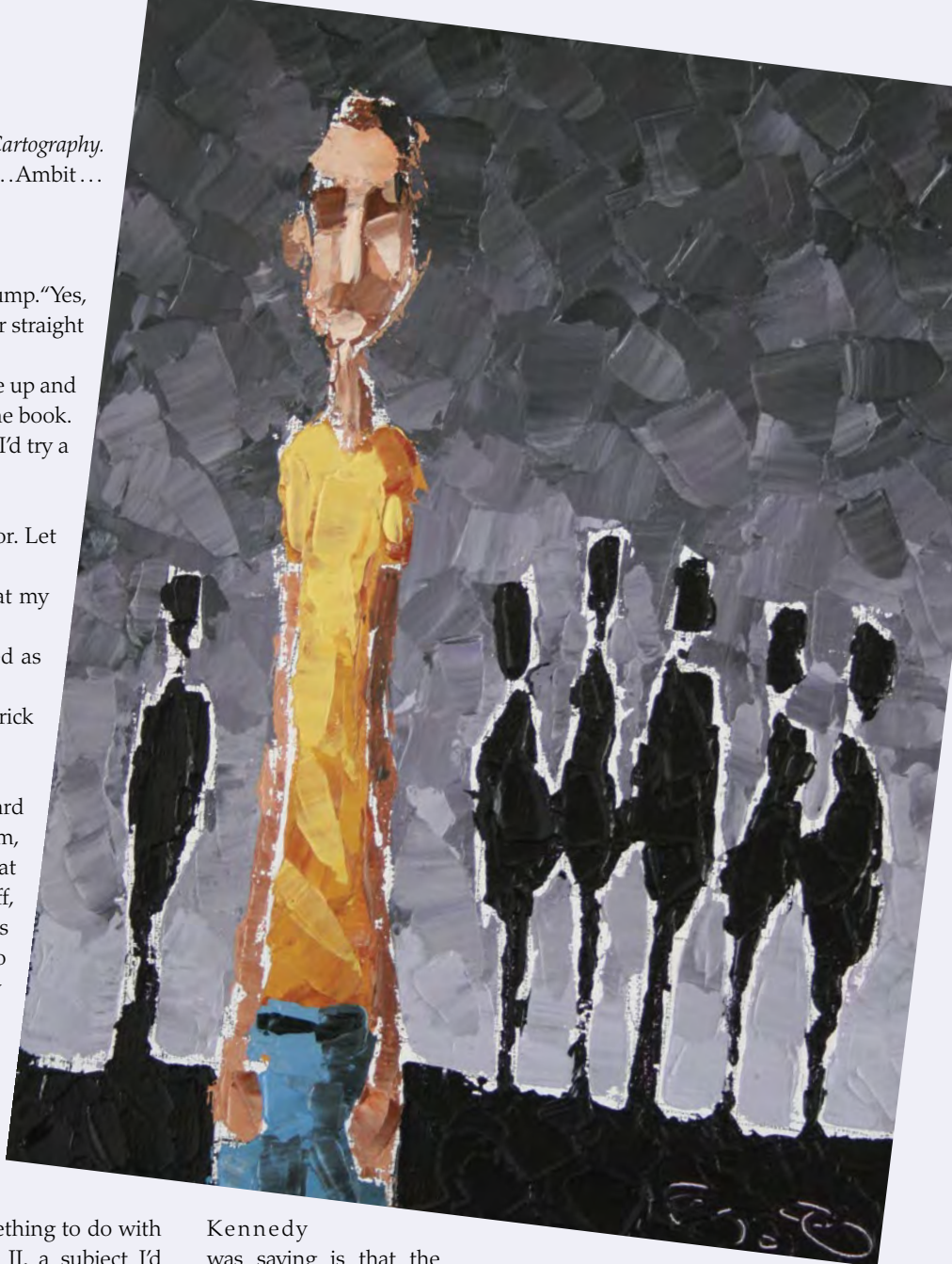
I paused and made eye contact with each judge. Bad news: Their eyes were already glazing over. I decided to change my strategy and go for it.

"But today I want to concentrate on the impact of this issue on one specific corner of the world: the continent of Europe."

A flicker of interest. *Go on before they fall asleep again.*

"I'm speaking now of post-war Europe, the Europe of today." Post-war was a term my social studies teacher, Mr. Ownby, used a lot; I knew it could apply to almost anything.

"Think of President Kennedy, before he was assassinated, standing in front of the Berlin Wall. 'I am in Berlin,' he said, in actual German. When the President spoke those words, he spoke for all of us . . . Words can be interpreted many ways, but what I think



Kennedy was saying is that the issue of abortion will never be resolved until Germany and the United States and the entire world work together."

I paused and looked once more at the judges. I had their attention now, all right. They were staring at me as if I'd taken off all my clothes. There was nothing to do but plunge ahead.

"One important factor, of course, is money." Every adult I'd ever known had said something like this to me, so I knew they all believed it. "Everyone should pay their fair share."

The judge with the goatee cocked an eyebrow and leaned forward on his desk.

"However," I continued, lowering my voice to a grave tone, "the way Europe acts, they must think we're *made* of money." I'd read that line in a short story somewhere, but wasn't sure fiction was an appropriate source. So I decided to quote more real life sources. "Still, we must invest in the welfare of our European friends and neighbors. As former President Eisenhower once said, 'Abortion and Europe are two of the most important problems we face.' The President never turned his back on either."

The judges twisted in their chairs. The judge with the goatee was smiling. The fat judge was eyeing me like something that

needed to be stomped with a boot. The female judge appeared to be getting ill.

Maybe the judges knew too much about what presidents have said. I tried a different source. "But politicians are not the only leaders of our society. Why have so many been silent on this issue for so long? For example, what would Mickey Mantle say about abortion?" I was pretty sure Mickey Mantle had said nothing whatever about abortion; he talked only about baseball and beer. "What would Billy Graham say?" Mistake, I realized instantly; Billy Graham had an opinion on everything. Quickly, I moved on: "What would John Lennon say? Or Ringo? Or Betty Crocker? After all, this issue affects women too . . ."

The judge with the goatee chuckled out loud, then straightened up in his chair. The female judge set down her pencil and glared at me.

And so it went, until at last, blessedly, my three minutes were up.

"Thank you, Mr. *Heller*," the judge with the goatee said when I'd stopped. "That was truly interesting. We'll have your score at the end of the round."

"How'd you do?" Phil asked when I came out of the room.

I shrugged. "Hard to tell. I think I used too many facts."

About an hour later, the woman at the table gave us our scores, along with the judges' comments.

A unique approach, one judge said. *I'd never considered the economic implications of abortion in these terms.*

Lively, but rather strange, another said. *I'm not sure about your thesis.*

Emphatic, but vague, the third said. *I couldn't tell what your position is.*

Overall, I placed fifth in my bracket. Not good enough to advance to the next round, but better than either of my teammates.

Before the substitute rounded us up for the drive home, I returned to the library and found *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, the biggest book I'd ever seen, perched on a music stand in the references section. It had the word, all right. For perhaps fifteen minutes, I stood there, reading and rereading the various definitions. Finally, a passing librarian inquired: "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, please," I replied. My voice quivered with the astonished wonder of one whose world had begun to spin in an entirely new direction. "Can you tell me where you keep the books on poison?"

These events were originally recounted in a longer narrative called "Ignorance Will Save You" (*What We Choose to Remember*, Serving House Books, 2009). Years after that publication, I think I would tell the story differently.

As I mentioned earlier, in comedy timing is crucial. Today I find more resonance, comic and not comic at all, in the silences: as I read and reread the definitions in the dictionary and as I pondered the librarian's question, wondering if, in that still unimaginable new world, anyone could truly be of help.

Two-time O. Henry Award winner STEVE HELLER grew up in Yukon, Oklahoma, and earned four degrees, including an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, from Oklahoma State University. He is the author of four books and numerous short stories and essays, and recently concluded a term as President of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), the international organization of writers who teach. He lives in Culver City, California, where he directs the MFA in creative writing program at Antioch University Los Angeles.

ROGER DISNEY holds a BFA from Oklahoma State University. His experience includes print and web design, illustration, custom furniture, teaching, photography, his comic "Pulp," and more. rogerdisney.com



End Notes from the Editor

Maybe it was the seven-year itch. (Yes, folks, this issue begins our seventh year of publication!) Maybe it was the long stretch of serious articles in our last two issues: partisanship, civil discourse, the commercialization of society, the history of medicine, end-of-life issues ... Whatever the reason, I thought: *Let's do something upbeat—like "humor." Yeah, humor will be fun for readers and really easy to find article topics—right? Wrong.*

My initial search for authors who write *about* humor (as opposed to writing *with* humor—think Dave Barry and David Sedaris) was downright depressing, nothing but dry theory and erudite philosophy: "The psychology of humor necessitates the element of surprise ..." "The evolution of laughter is ascertained from early cave drawings ..." "Linguistics are inherent in any study of verbal humor ..."

What happened to sight gags and the funny papers? Does no one slip on banana peels anymore?

How humor "works" is anything but funny. Like popular culture, humor studies was dismissed as trivial for a long time. But there is a growing body of work in the humanities that recognizes the essential role of comedy and laughter through history. Our writers in this issue represent some of that scholarship.

No doubt you found something in this edition of *Oklahoma HUMANITIES* surprising, unsettling, perhaps shocking. These are the very emotions humor employs to evoke laughter. They don't call it a *punch* line for nothing. A sense of humor is part of what makes us "human" and yet comedy is not universal. Sometimes the joke is relevant only to a specific group, region, or culture; other times, humor can be sweeping. It's certainly an essential part of the American character.

To recognize that inherent quality of our national character, the Kennedy Center established The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 1998, most recently awarded to Carol Burnett. The award recognizes people whose humor has impacted American society in the same ways that author Samuel Clemens (a.k.a. Mark Twain) did. The Kennedy Center notes that Mark Twain was "a fearless observer of society, who outraged many while delighting and informing many more with his uncompromising perspective of social injustice and personal folly." Now that's inspiration we can get behind: fearless observation that will outrage, delight, inform, and provide perspective.

I can't close this column without at least an *attempt* at humor—at our own expense of course.

How many humanities scholars does it take to screw in a light bulb? Fourteen. Three to study the history of light bulb replacement; six to offer interpretations on the existing literature, particularly as it pertains to inventor Thomas Edison; one to lead a panel discussion on the light bulb's impact on contemporary society; one to collect and edit the resulting dissertations for publication; one to hold the ladder steady; one to climb said ladder and execute the replacement; and one to prepare the Power Point presentation: "After the Ladder: The Rise (and Fall) of Light Bulb Moments."

To quote Twain again, "Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand." We hope this issue positively bowled you over.

Carla Walker, Editor
carla@okhumanities.org



Little Ones 5040, NIGEL CONWAY. Born in Manchester, England in 1966, Nigel Conway's artistic path and acclaimed style has made him a sought-after artist by collectors both nationally and internationally. nigelconway.com

Next up: RIGHTS | Summer 2014

Discussions on how far we've come—and the tensions that still challenge us. You won't want to miss the lineup of national authors in our next issue.



428 W. California Avenue, Suite 270
 Oklahoma City, OK 73102
 (405) 235-0280 • Fax: (405) 235-0289
 www.okhumanities.org

Non-Profit Organization
 U.S. Postage Paid
 Oklahoma City, OK
 Permit No. 863

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Culture. Issues. Ideas.

Oklahoma HUMANITIES magazine—fresh insights on your world.

Alternative points of **view**

Perspective from critical thinkers

In-depth **exploration** of issues

Creative work from **Oklahoma** artists

Photography from around the world

Visual **treasures** from our national archives

Because you want more than a good read—you want an **experience**.

Don't Let Your Subscription Expire!

Stay on our mailing list with a gift of support.

Oklahoma HUMANITIES magazine is an important part of OHC public programming. If you value the magazine, please help support the costs of publication. Use the return envelope stapled in this issue or visit our secure webpage and click on "Donate." www.okhumanities.org

