

An Anatomy of Confusion

"Thurber Country," by **James Thurber** (Simon & Schuster, 277 pp. \$3.75), is a new collection of pieces about males and females, mostly of our own species, that originally appeared in *The Bermudian*, *The New Yorker*, and other publications. Here it is reviewed by David McCord, executive secretary of the Harvard Fund Council and a professional reviewer of Thurber's books (see below).

By David McCord

I DON'T know what the editor has decided to say about me in the couple of lines of italics above, but if he is truthful he will describe me as professional reviewer of James Thurber's books. The trouble is that Mr. Thurber won't stay reviewed, and I haven't the strength to say No whenever a new volume comes along—which is much oftener than every five or six years. The only man (or woman) to whom I feel faintly superior at the moment is the professional Thurber-Blurber, and even he or she must be growing weary of the trade.

The fact remains that Mr. Thurber apparently has no interest in writing a bad book. Most authors are unhappy unless they can uncork a sour bottle now and then. Not the author of "What's So Funny?" Of course he is queer anyway, and it may be that he is merely confused—that he really *thinks* he has written a bad book, or is capable of writing one. A tenable argument, you'll grant. Then suddenly the thought occurs to me: How would I deal with a *bad* Thurber? It is hard enough to deal with a *good* Thurber. As he himself is not below saying on page 103 of "Thurber Country": "The Anatomy of Confusion is a large subject." Only a confused reviewer can hope to explain the Thurber psyche, and of this special group I am the present Corresponding Non-Sequituri. I am now ready for the volume at hand.

On another occasion I have spoken of "the portable world" of the author of whom we are speaking. Perhaps I was wrong. In *Thurber Country*—with or without quotes—Mr. Thurber appears as the portable man. I can think of no book among the several dozen by as many writers that I have

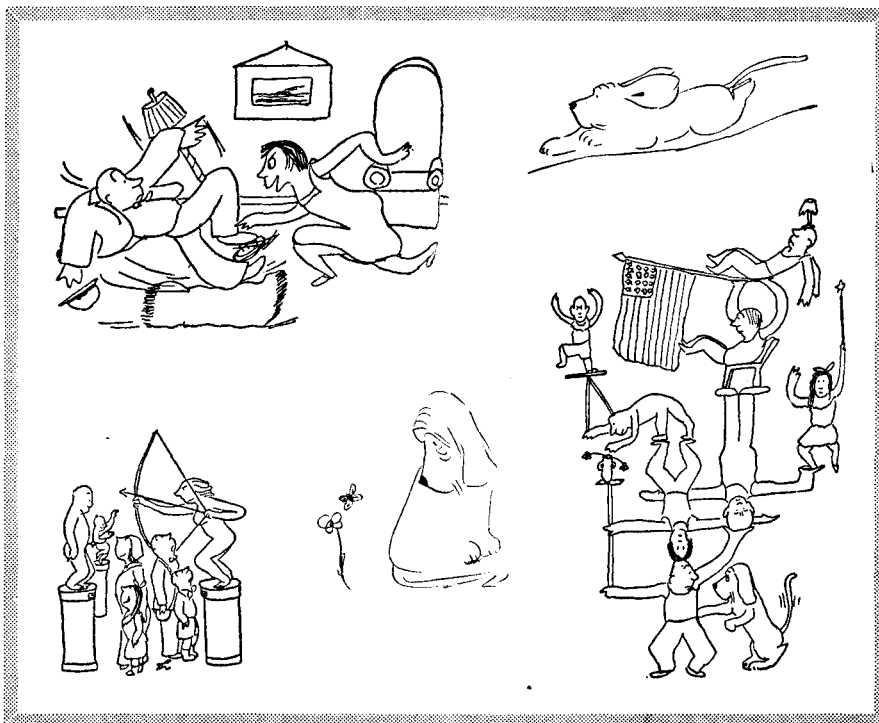
read in this century which holds together so well without a drop of glue, a lally post, or a flying buttress. Not a single piece in "Thurber Country" is related to its neighbor, and only the two "letter" chapters are in identical form; yet the whole is tied together with the skill and beauty of a Turk's-head knot. (A sailor wouldn't add the word "knot," but I am no sailor.) James Thurber is not only an artist in "involving people on their far edges," but he is a craftsman at making the impossible seem more than improbable. He is also the originator of the composition which I shall call Variation with Themes.

Not every traveler is equipped to enter Thurber Country and come out alive and in possession of his sanity. A left-handed compass and an inclination toward insomnia are requisite accessories. A first reading of "What a Lovely Generalization!" or "Do You Want to Make Something Out of It?" will make you drop your sleeping pills into the coffee. A glance at the latter when it first appeared in *The New Yorker*—the acknowledgment note doesn't say that it appeared there, but I know better—led me into a nightmare from which I woke repeating the words "eye, beady eye." Translated, I discovered that this is

simply "ibdi," and I give it now to Mr. Thurber in his game of Superghosts to get out of as best he can.

You will find exactly twenty-five chapters, pieces, or items in this book. Not every one is as good as the next, but none of them are tired chapters, pieces, or items of the sort I have read by the score even in Leacock or Benchley when they were going strong. I think that "The Pleasure Cruise, and How to Survive It" is a little long, but I could read half through "War and Peace," were that great work intended as humor, if I could only be sure to come upon the fireworks paragraph. "File and Forget" is superb, and "A Friend of the Earth" is, I guess, plain magic—and deeply moving magic as well. There is no one half so good as a humorist when it comes to handling minor tragedy.

If this is the last book of Mr. Thurber (out of respect for him) that I shall review, it is not the last one that I shall read with the old excitement and nostalgia. If this is the best book by Mr. Thurber that I have read I am not saying; but I rather suspect that it is. May the day never come when *Thurber Country* yields to the bulldozer and the ranch house. There is still, most fortunately for all of us, but a single covered wagon creaking across it. The driver is a former Ohio State man, as he should be. I fear that he may acknowledge to a little loneliness at times. But if it is any compensation to him he ought to know by now that he is the greatest and most original humorist this country has produced to date.



—From "Thurber Country."

The English Boffo

"The Best Humor from Punch," edited by William Cole (*World Publishing Co.* 350 pp. \$3.50), is a collection of prose pieces drawn from the well-known British weekly. Morris Bishop, professor of Romance languages at Cornell University, who reviews it here, edited *"A Treasury of British Humor."*

By Morris Bishop

PUNCH is the only avowedly humorous magazine of general circulation published in English today, unless *Tit-Bits* is still going. (For *The New Yorker* must not be called a humorous magazine, and the college comic papers, strange vestiges of an earlier cultural epoch, are local, incomprehensible beyond their little range.) *Punch* is unique, an artifact of great interest to the meditative observer.

"The Best Humor from Punch," which William Cole has edited, consists of recent contributions in prose and verse. The pleasant introduction gives us something of the paper's background, and analyzes its present policy. "Its role is social history—to record the age," the editor of *Punch* is quoted as saying. Let us then examine "The Best Humor from Punch" as a record of social history.

The author of a *Punch* piece is middle-aged, married, financially embarrassed, very well educated. He has gone to a good school, but he would be the last to boast of it; he would never wear the old school tie to business. He has no political views, in fact no convictions of any kind. He is staggeringly incompetent, and is defeated by the smallest household mechanism. He is mildly psychotic. He is constantly robbed, cheated, mocked, put to shame. He falls off horses. He incessantly smokes a pipe, which keeps falling apart while in full combustion.

Compare this pitiable character with the *Punch* writer of, say, 1910, who was rich, unemployed, self-confident, contemptuous of Americans, Jews, millionaires, and all the frightful bounders who dropped their aitches and fell off their horses when attempting to ride to hounds. This contrast reveals a fundamental insecurity in the current writer, if not indeed a regression toward prenatal peace.

The picture of contemporary Britain which emerges from these pages is terrifying to the foreigner. Life is full of menace. Wild animals roam the streets. Machinery flies to pieces. Su-

perheated steam dissolves one's clothing, which is of the shoddiest material. Nothing works. On all sides one hears the crash of china, water jugs, decanters, ashtrays, eggs. Waiters pour food in laps. Ink leaks in handbags.

Are we to see in this obsession with havoc a symbol of the fall of empire? Or a new diabolism pointing to a recrudescence of faith? On the whole I should say no. I should say that we are to see merely the persistence of comic devices which were formalized about the time of Charlot's Revue, the Early Noel Coward Period.

Many of the devices are all too recognizable: the pratfall, the build-up to a let-down, the backfire of the gimmick. And the pun ("I could give you a summary, but it would be pretty wintry"). And the funny name: Mr. Emery Wheel, Miss Podmarsh, Uggshaw, the Right Honourable Percy Drooping. But perhaps these are not funny names to the British.

You will say, I fear, that you are not much interested in the analysis of comic devices, even that you are not concerned with the role of *Punch* as social history. You want to know whether the book is funny.

Well, I thought it was fairly funny. There are a number of splendid things in it. But too much of it, most of it, is done to formula. The formula does not bother you when you pick up the paper occasionally in the club, but when you have 350 pages to read you become painfully aware of the assumed, self-conscious attitudes of the writers, who all seem to be the same person.

I am sorry. The British often seem to me the most humorous people in the world. But those who too earnestly pursue humor are likely to become mired in the dreary marshes of the facetious. And in this volume, with its monotony of tone, its insistence on grotesque misadventures, its avoidance of the substantial thought and conviction which make great humor, we have far too much of the facetious.

Nevertheless, there are some very pretty bits. Here are some names we should remember, for we may see them again: Barry Craig, J. B. Boothroyd, Thomas Evan Ryves, D. Brock, Richard Mallett, Rodney Hobson, Terrence Bernard Thompson, F. Mayne, and Commander A. H. Barton, R. N.



—Sprud, for "The Best Humor from Punch."

"... a new diabolism ... ?"

How to Go

"A Pictorial History of the Automobile, 1903-1953," by Philip Van Doren Stern (*Viking Press.* 256 pp. \$7.50), is an album drawn from the files of the magazine *Motor*.

By Al Hine

BACK sometime in the mid-Twenties my pre-teen-age companions and I used to avoid juvenile delinquency in a halfhearted way by "playing automobile." All we needed was a pair of scissors and access to a good supply of magazines. We cut out carefully the handsome auto advertisements in *Liberty* and *The Literary Digest*, the *Post* and *Collier's*, *Judge* and *Scribner's*. Most prized were those in color which were not spoiled by overprinting or by the addition of human beings. Rainy afternoons we compared our collections, sometimes swapped, more often raced our flat cars—carefully so as not to tear them—across the carpet. "Watch this Locomobile go, whraaannnrh! Right past your Dusey and push that old *Liberty* of Jimmy's into the ditch." Mad, reckless days those, and there have been moments of infantile nostalgia when I have longed for their return.

Well, they returned just the other day in the form of a big (nine- by twelve-inch) book entitled "A Pictorial History of the Automobile" and edited by Philip Van Doren Stern. I haven't got my scissors out yet, but if it rains next Sunday and any of the old gang are in the neighborhood this is the book for us.

Mr. Stern's book has been put together largely from the seemingly endless and all-inclusive files of *Motor* magazine, a hardy pioneer of horseless carriage journalism which has flourished since 1903. It is not a definitive history of the automobile; there can't be one this side of encyclopedia dimensions. It is, for the motor-minded browser, something infinitely better—a 256-page bull session devoted in almost disorganized good humor and enthusiasm to the highways and byways of motoring in the past fifty years.

Most of the facts in "A Pictorial History" can be found in other volumes, but I've never seen so many of them, so diverse and diverting, with pictures, gathered, so to speak, into one parking lot. Mr. Stern offers us a warm and reminiscent introduction chronicling his own life with the internal combustion engine. Harold Blanchard, engineering consultant to *Motor*, contributes a chapter on famous automotive firsts, from the slid-