

Thurber's Vision

By Dennis Knight

It happened in 1901 in a childhood game of William Tell. His brother's arrow missed the apple and the six year old James Thurber lived the remainder of his sixty-six years blind in one eye. Thirty-five years later, in his forties, vision in the other began to fail, too.

I admire and try to emulate many of the American humorists, including Mark Twain, H. Allen Smith, Robert Benchley, Art Buchwald and Erma Bombeck. But Thurber is my favorite, with prose that makes me laugh out loud, and the bonus of his wonderful drawings. Whenever Thurber's name is mentioned (and I drop it frequently myself) *The Night the Bed Fell on Father* comes to mind, and then I think of his drawing of a bride, awakened unhappily by a concerned husband, and the caption, "All right, have it your way, you heard a seal bark!"

Thurber was originally brought onto *The New Yorker* to be the next in a series of managing editors, but he too was ineffectual in that job and was shifted into writing. He took pride in his writing skill, and was influenced by E.B. White with whom he shared an office at the magazine. His short articles, which were called "casuals" by Thurber and the magazine staff, included fables, stories, essays and pieces less easily labeled.

When he wasn't writing, he was doodling. Around the office, staffers would find sketches of dogs, seals and improbably shaped humans. White came across a drawing of a seal on a rock, peering out onto the ocean with two dots on the horizon and the caption, "Hmm. Explorers."

White recognized talent in those doodles, and took them regularly to the magazine's art meetings, but they were always rejected, which prompted Thurber to work on improving his drawing style. White protested, "Don't do that. If you ever got good you'd be mediocre." Harold Ross, the founder and editor-in-chief of the magazine asked Thurber, "How the hell did you get the idea that you could draw."

Soon, White and Thurber collaborated on a new book, *Is Sex Necessary?* Thurber illustrated it himself, it was a hit, and Ross regretted he had been passing on the drawings. Thurber recalled, "He came into my office and said: 'Where's that damned seal drawing you did ... And I said: 'Where is it? You rejected it, so I threw it away.' And he said: 'Don't throw things away just because I don't like them — or think I don't. Do it again!'"

By the 1940s, the sight in his one functioning eye also began to fail. In 1942 he adopted a Zeiss loupe for drawing, and eventually had to change from pencil and pad to very large sheets of paper and a thick black crayon. Regardless of his method, Thurber's drawings always had a wobbly feel that mimicked his idiosyncratic view of life. According to his friend and contemporary, Dorothy Parker, they had the "semblance of unbaked cookies."

He was a man of wit and humor, and despite his impaired sight and eventual blindness, few have ever seen and portrayed life, in drawing or in word, with more acuity of vision than did James Thurber.