

Joyride at the Thurber Carnival

By Dennis Payton Knight

It was just a week to the day since Mr. Martin had decided to rub out Mrs. Ulgine Barrows. The term "rub out" pleased him because it suggested nothing more than the correction of an error..."

That is an excerpt from James Thurber's short story, "The Catbird Seat," part of his collection of stories and cartoons in the book entitled *The Thurber Carnival*. Thurber occupies a stage high in the auditorium of American humorists, alongside Ogden Nash and Sam Clemens (with the pseudonym of Mark Twain.) I occupy a hopeful, back bench in that classroom.

Her quacking voice and braying laugh had first profaned the halls of F & S on March 7, 1941...

Mr. Martin had come to despise Mrs. Barrows. The woman relentlessly borrowed colorful idioms like "the catbird seat" from the Brooklyn Dodgers' radio announcer, Red Barber. Expressions like "Are you lifting the oxcart out of the ditch?" were so maddening Mr. Martin wanted to rub her out. Get the book and read the story yourself. I promise an ending that will satisfy you, as it did Mr. Martin.

The Thurber Carnival contains another of his best stories, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Written in 1939, Thurber went through fifteen drafts of the piece before he finally got it into *The New Yorker Magazine*. Walter Mitty, a quiet, reserved husband, would meander from the ordinary tasks of living into day-dreams, finding himself in the throes of fanciful adventure.

"Full strength in No. 3 turret!" The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of hell!" ...

"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?" "Hmm?" said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd. "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five."

Thurber's simply drawn cartoons stand by themselves as brilliant works of art and literature. Let your own Walter Mitty imagination create pictures from these captions:

*For the last time – you and your horsie get away from me, and stay away!
And this is Tom Weatherby, an old beau of your mother's. He never got to first base.
Well, if I called the wrong number, why did you answer the phone?
All right, have it your way – you heard a seal bark.
This gentleman was kind enough to see me home, darling.
Are you the young man who bit my daughter?*

To summarize, I enthusiastically recommend *The Thurber Carnival* or anything ever written or drawn by James Thurber. And here is one more caption for your fancy:

Have you seen my pistol, honey-bun?