

Tindal Street Masterclasses

Masterclass by Paul McDonald No. 9: How to write a funny short story

Humour is not always appropriate in fiction but, as in life, it is generally more welcome than not. Writers who are able to exploit their capacity for humour can augment the power of their work considerably: authors are entertainers, after all, and there are few better ways to entertain than to raise a titter. And humour is particularly suited to the short form: themes, ideas and styles that can begin to pall in long narratives work better in short stories; indeed, short tales often have a joke-like structure, with a comic pay-off coming at the end. What is a twist in the tale if not a punchline? There are many great exponents of the humorous short story, but for me the master of the art is the twentieth century American humorist, James Thurber. Writers seeking to develop their talent for humour could do worse than to use him as a model.

Thurber was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1894 into what appears to have been a family of jokers. Certainly his mother was something of a wag, on one occasion pretending to be disabled at a faith healing session only to leap to her feet as if she'd been healed. (And I thought my mother was embarrassing.) When Thurber began publishing in the 1920s it was clear that he'd inherited her penchant for humour. He developed a strong association with *The New Yorker*, and the stories that appeared there and in collections such as *The Middle Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935) and *The Thurber Carnival* (1945) exhibit what might be called the humour of despair: they are comic tales about individuals who struggle to cope with the modern world. His characters are failures, and as any humorist will tell you, failure is funnier than success. That's probably the first tip Thurber would offer if you asked him for advice. He may also advise you to be aware of the three Ts: Tone, Trimming, and Timing. Seeing as Thurber

is no longer around to explain this, I'll do it on his behalf, with reference to his famous short story, 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' (1939).

'Walter Mitty' is the tale of a man who is intimidated by authority, technology, and, most of all, his wife. He finds solace in a fantasy world where he imagines himself a hero. Thurber juxtaposes an account of Mitty's mundane reality with glimpses into his imagination where he is by turns a fearless pilot, a brilliant surgeon, and a heroic ladies' man. The story opens with Mitty imagining himself as the commander of a Navy hydroplane struggling through a hurricane:

'We're going through!' The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore full dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold grey eye.

Establishing a comic tone in a story is less about telling jokes and more about choosing words that elicit a patina of humour. The word that does that here is 'rakishly'. When we encounter it we realise that the hero is being mocked – it evokes a deliberately corny image, indicative of Mitty's inflated alter ego. His view of himself as a hero comes from absurd popular culture stereotypes and the kind of stories in which the word 'rakishly' wouldn't seem out of place. He is not a hero, in other words; he is an idiot, a fact communicated succinctly by that single word.

My reference to succinctness brings me to the second T: Trimming. Louise Brooks once said, "Writing is 1% inspiration and 99% elimination", and this is especially true of humour. Bloated writing always kills humour, as does over- explanation: Thurber doesn't need to tell us that Mitty is an absurd little man, ripe for ridicule, because one word does the job for him. Consider this:

The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight engined Navy hydroplane, looked at one another 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.

Here the scene in which Mitty is a hero ends and Mitty's reality, where he is a pathetic, henpecked husband, begins. Thurber builds him up in order to deflate him and, once more, a sense of Mitty's character – his apathy and bewilderment – is conveyed with a single word: 'Hmm?' Thurber is creating a comic contrast which brings us to the third T: Timing.

Notice that there is no elaborate transition between Mitty's fantasy and his reality. Thurber doesn't waste time introducing the latter because it must intrude *abruptly* on the former in order to be funny. Surprise is important in humour, and that is what Thurber achieves as Mitty is jerked back into his banal life where the admiring words of his 'crew' are suddenly replaced by his wife's scolding. The timing is immaculate. Aspiring writers keen to weave a little humour into their work would do well to read James Thurber, then, and to remember the three Ts: choose words that succinctly establish a comic Tone, Trim your narrative of superfluties that will take the edge off your wit, and Time your comic moments so that – like those of the master himself - they have the power to surprise and amuse.

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