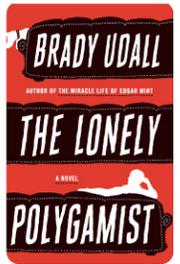
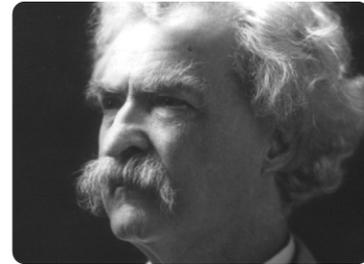


Humor and Satire

Let's Talk About It!



Why Am I Reading This? Theme Information

Lasting works of humor shed light on the human condition and cause us to see old subjects in new ways. When conventions and rules become so familiar as to seem natural and inevitable, a humorist reminds us that the rules can crumble and be remade. Erma Bombeck explodes the myth of the happy housewife. Charles Dickens finds human sympathy in a tight-fisted moneylender. Brady Udall reveals the anxieties and aspirations of adults and children in a polygamous home. The books in this category cause us to pause in our laughter and think again about something we thought we understood: marriage and family life, race, war, the afterlife, and even the Holocaust! Books are drawn from the last two centuries and from the present, showing how the best laughter transcends its moment and forges communities of understanding across continents, generations, and cultures. (Tara Penry, Assoc. Prof. of English, BSU)

Book List

1. *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens
2. *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller*
3. *Food: A Love Story*, Jim Gaffigan
4. *Forever Erma*, Erma Bombeck
5. *Green Grass, Running Water*, Thomas King
6. *Hope: A Tragedy*, Shalom Auslander
7. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, David Sedaris
8. *Messages From My Father*, Calvin Trillin
9. *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen
10. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain
11. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie
12. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde
13. *The Skyscraper That Flew and Other Stories*, by Jesus Salvador Trevino
14. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, by Maria Semple

**Catch-22* is longer than average LTAI books. Recommended 1 month between sessions.

Theme Essay

This is not a category of “funny” books (though some titles will be “funny” to some tastes); it is a category in which humor of all kinds – from nostalgic to self-deprecating to the gruesome and absurd – proves essential to human experience.

Humor can humanize or dehumanize, ennoble or debase. It can release tensions and cause us to see old subjects in new ways, but it can also make us bristle and grimace. People who study humor tell us it works by violating what we know, believe, or accept: it’s funny to think a chicken would have a *reason* for going across the road or anywhere else – we all know chickens do not have intention, don’t we? Sometimes a writer “crosses a line that shouldn’t be crossed” or just “isn’t funny”: when we find a joke in poor taste or unsuccessful, we have an opportunity to observe which conventions or beliefs we do not share with the writer, and which we are unwilling to see violated. Is the ineffective psychiatrist named Jove in *Hope: A Tragedy* amusingly ironic for you, or sacrilegious? Do the Italian twins in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* provide a lower-stakes, funny mirror to the pairing of Tom and Chambers, or are we unwilling to laugh in this book at the sad bondage of man to man, the sacrifice of our treasured individualism?

The books in this category are selected to encourage discussion about the way humor itself works amid real and challenging life experiences – crises of belief, acts of needless violence, racial prejudice, loneliness, economic uncertainty, death, the dullness of familial routine. When is humor necessary? Which proprieties need to be aired with laughter? On the other hand, what personal boundaries do we as readers not wish to see crossed? When the books in this category reveal cultural differences, to what extent does humor exaggerate differences between people of different conventions and norms, and to what extent does it help to bridge differences?

In some of these titles – *Hope: A Tragedy*, *Catch-22*, *Pudd’nhead Wilson* – tragedies occur even when well-intentioned people are doing their best, and no one will find these events funny. In *Hope: A Tragedy* and *Catch-22*, dark humor remains when all decencies seem to have fallen away. Is it enough?

Other books in this category are lighter and less troubling to read. We are never really in doubt about Calvin Trillin's admiration for his father or Erma Bombeck's commitment to family life, even though the father in Trillin's memoir is imperfect and children in Bombeck's anthology are a constant provocation; in the books of these career humorists, like the novels *Green Grass, Running Water, Where'd You Go, Bernadette?*, and the novel-in-stories *The Skyscraper That Flew and Other Stories*, humor facilitates catharsis and forgiveness, proving itself a powerful, healing ally in family and community life.

"Humor must not professedly teach," wrote Mark Twain, "and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years. With all its preaching it is not likely to outlive so long a term as that." (*Mark Twain in Eruption*). *Pudd'nhead Wilson* shows us Mark Twain's ongoing concerns about the moral and personal consequences of racial inequality in America. Does Twain strike the right balance for you between preaching and teaching and joking in this book? Do other authors on this list?

Most humor writing is ephemeral, passing out of memory with the events that created it, but some works of humor speak not just to the social proprieties of a time and place, but to ongoing human dilemmas. What do the books in this category teach and preach across times, places, and cultures? What proprieties, rules, or decencies of the past do we find broken by writers of a century or more ago? Are we glad those humorists helped to break those boundaries? What boundaries, beliefs, and proprieties are more recent humorists trying to make us see freshly? In what way do the books in this list turn our contemporary world on its head?