

TRAVELING INTO THURBER COUNTRY



I hadn't thought about author and cartoonist James Thurber in a good while, but some plans to visit Columbus, Ohio, brought him back

to mind.

Thurber, who grew up in Columbus, is best known for "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," his 1939 short story about a henpecked husband who answers the discomforts of domestic life by casting himself as the hero of lavishly constructed daydreams.

"Mitty" has been adapted twice for the big screen, though both versions missed the point of Thurber's story. Mitty isn't just trying to escape life in his daydreams. The fantasies he constructs are real works of art, the product of a creative genius.

What Thurber seems to be saying is that all of us – even ostensibly humdrum folks like Walter Mitty – have the capacity to weave stories that sustain us.

In making that observation about Mitty, Thurber was no doubt writing about himself. His middle-class origins in the Midwest, often sneeringly dismissed



James Thurber's challenges with physical vision after a childhood accident helped shape him into the writer he became. Despite his losses, he kept his sense of humor.

by coastal elites as a place where not much happens, didn't seem at first glance like a propitious start for a literary career. But the understated sensibility of his region rests at the heart of Thurber's humor. His drollery never raises its voice, which is central to its charm.

Some readers today might find Thurber's literary voice a bit too reticent. Although Thurber wrote at length about his boyhood in early twentieth-century Columbus, he doesn't mention a defining moment of his youth, when a sibling accidentally blinded him in one eye while they were playing. In later years, Thurber's other eye began to fail, forcing him to write by dictation and make his funny cartoons with a huge magnifying glass. Thurber's struggles with vision would have no doubt made for a compelling memoir, but he wrote before the deeply confessional school of autobiography came into fashion.

Thurber's mildly subversive style is easy to overlook, which is why my own copies of his books – *The Thurber Carnival*, *Thurber Country*, and *People Have More Fun Than Anybody* – tend to lie unopened for years.

Thurber died in 1961 at 66. I'll try to visit his boyhood home, now open as a museum and writer's center, whenever I get to Columbus. But fetching his books from my shelf and revisiting his graceful prose has been, in its own way, pilgrimage enough.

Self-portrait of James Thurber courtesy Thurber's estate.

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