Christmas Books: The Leg In The Christmas Stocking: What We Learned From Jokes

By ANNIE DILLARD

Our parents would have sooner left us out of Christmas than leave us out of a joke. They explained a joke to us while they were still laughing at it; they tore a still-kicking joke apart so we could see how it worked. When we got the first Tom Lehrer album in 1954, when I was 9, Mother went through it with me, cut by cut, explaining.

Our father kept in his breast pocket a black notebook. There he noted jokes he wanted to remember. Remembering jokes was a moral obligation. People who said "I can never remember jokes" were like people who said, obliviously, "I can never remember names" or "I don't bathe."

"No one tells jokes like your father," Mother said. Telling a good joke well - successfully, perfectly -was the highest art. It was an art because it was up to you. If you did not get the laugh, you had told it wrong. Work on it, and do better next time. It would have been reprehensible to blame the joke or, worse, the audience.

As we children got older, our parents discussed with us every technical, theoretical and moral aspect of the art. We tinkered with a joke's narrative structure: "Maybe you should begin with the Indians." We polished the wording. There is a Julia Randall story set in Baltimore that we smoothed together for years. Must the man say, "Folks generally call me Bominitious?" No, he can just say, "They call me Bominitious."

We analyzed many kinds of pacing. We admired with Father the leisurely meanders of the shaggy dog story. "Fellow went to Juilliard," one story of his began, "studied composition" and ended, to a blizzard of thrown napkins ". . . known as the Moron Tab and Apple Choir." "Frog goes into a bank," another story began, to my enduring pleasure. The joke was not great, but with what a sweet light splash you could launch it!

And so my sisters and I learned to love it all, all that any joke-teller needs, and a good bit of what any writer needs. We learned to love thinking about narration - about the imaginative power in its manipulable segments. We learned to calculate and guide a narration's effects on an audience at every stage. We learned to love careful, controlled language. We learned to love paradox, incongruity and surprise.

Father was fond of stories set in bars that starred zoo animals or insects. These creatures apparently came into bars all over America, either accompanied or alone,

and sat down to face incredulous, sarcastic bartenders. (It was a wonder the bartenders were always so surprised to see talking dogs or drinking monkeys or performing ants, so surprised year after year, when clearly this sort of thing was the very essence of bar life.) In the few years he had been loose, before he married, Father had frequented bars in New York, listening to jazz. His bar jokes - "and there were the regulars, all sitting around" - gave him the raffish air of a man who was at home anywhere.

Our mother favored a staccato, stand-up style; if our father could perorate, she could condense. Fellow goes to a psychiatrist. "You're crazy." "I want a second opinion!" "You're ugly."

What else in life so required, and so rewarded, such care? "Tell the girls the one about the four-by-twos, Frank." "Let's see. Let's see." "Fellow goes into a lumberyard . . ."

"Yes, but it's tricky. It's a matter of point of view." And Father left the dining room, rubbing his face in concentration, or as if he were smearing on greasepaint, and returned when he was ready. "Ready with the four-by-twos?" Mother said. Our father hung his hands in his pockets and regarded the far ceiling with fond reminiscence. "Fellow comes into a lumberyard," he began. "Says to the guy, 'I need some four-by-twos.' 'You mean two-by-fours?' 'Just a minute. I'll find out.' He walks out to the parking lot where his buddies are waiting in the car. They roll down the car window. He confers with them awhile and comes back across the parking lot and says to the lumberyard guy, 'Yes. I mean two-by-fours.'

"Lumberyard guy says, 'How long do you want them?' 'Just a minute,' fellow says, 'I'll find out.' He goes out across the parking lot and confers with the people in the car and comes back across the parking lot to the lumberyard and says to the guy, 'A long time. We're building a house.' "

After any performance Father rubbed the top of his face with both hands, as if it had all been a dream. "And when you tell a joke," Mother said to my sisters and me, "Laugh. It's mean not to."

We were brought up on the classics. Our parents told us all the great old American jokes, practically by number. They collaborated on, and for our benefit specialized in, like paleontologists, the painstaking reconstruction of vanished jokes from extant tag lines. They could vivify old New Yorker cartoons, source of many tag lines. The lines themselves - "Back to the old drawing board" and "I say it's spinach and I say the hell with it" and "A simple yes or no will be sufficient" - were no longer funny; they were instead something better, they were a fixture in the language. The tag lines of old jokes were the most powerful expressions we learned at our parents' knees.

There was one complicated joke, in a select category, which required a long weekend with tolerant friends. You had to tell a joke that was not funny. It was a long, pointless story about a construction job that ended with someone throwing away a brick. There was nothing funny about it at all, and when your friends did not laugh, you had to pretend you'd muffed it. (Your husband in the crowd could shill for you: " 'Tain't funny, Pam. You told it all wrong.") A few days later, if you could contrive another occasion for joke-telling, and if your friends still permitted you to speak, you set forth on another joke, this one a 19th-century chestnut about angry passengers on a train. The lady plucks the lighted, smelly cigar from the man's mouth and flings it from the moving train's window. The man seizes the little black poodle from her lap and hurls the poor dog from the same window. When at last the passengers draw unspeaking into the station, what do they see coming down the platform but the black poodle, and guess what it has in its mouth? "The cigar," say your friends, bored sick and vowing never to spend another weekend with you. "No," you say triumphant, "the brick." This was Mother's kind of joke. Its very riskiness excited her. It wasn't funny, but it was interesting to set up, and it elicited from her friends a grudging admiration. How long, I wondered, could you stretch this out? How boldly could you push an audience - not to, in Mother's terms, "slay them," but to please them in some grand way? How can you convince the listeners that you know what you are doing, that the payoff will come? Or conversely, how long could you lead them to think you are stupid, a dumb blonde, to enhance their surprise at the punch line and heighten their pleasure in the story you have controlled all along? Alone, energetic and trying to fall asleep, walking the residential streets long distances every day, I pondered these things. You've got to think about something.

Our parents were both sympathetic to what professional comedians call flop sweat. Boldness was all at our house, and of course you would lose some. Anyone could be misled by poor judgment into telling a "woulda hadda been there." Telling a funny story was harder than telling a joke; it was trying out, as a tidy unit, some raveling shred of the day's fabric. You learned to gauge what sorts of thing would "tell." You learned that some people, notably your parents, could rescue some things by careful narration from the category "woulda hadda been there" to the category "it tells."

At the heart of originating a funny story was recognizing it as it floated by. You scooped the potentially solid tale from the flux of history. Once I overheard my parents arguing over a 30-year-old story's credit line. "It was my mother who said that," Mother said. "Yes, but" - Father was downright smug - "I was the one who noticed she said that." MY parents favored practical jokes of the sort you set up and then retire from, much as one writes books, possibly because imagining people's reactions beats witnessing them. They procured a live hen and "hypnotized" it by setting it on the sink before the bathroom mirror in a friend's cottage by the New

Jersey shore. They spent weeks constructing a 10-foot sea monster - from truck inner tubes, cement blocks, broomsticks, lumber, pillows - and set it afloat in a friend's pond. I woke one Christmas morning to find in my stocking a leg. Mother had charmed a department store display manager into lending her one.

When I visited my friends, I was well advised to rise when their parents entered the room. When my friends visited me, they were well advised to duck.

Central in the orders of merit, and the very bread and butter of everyday life, was the crack. Our mother excelled at making cracks. We learned early to feed her lines just to watch her speed to the draw. If someone else fired a crack simultaneously, we compared their concision and pointedness and declared a winner.

Naturally my younger sisters and I prized the ability to make good cracks the way Sioux girls prized the ability to take tiny stitches - or, more aptly, the way Sioux boys prized the ability to take scalps. I remember well the occasion of the first crack I made that people laughed at, and the second. My parents were apparently modestly - but actually deliriously - proud.

Feeding our mother lines, we were training as straight men. The straight man's was an honorable calling, a bit like that of the rodeo clown: despised by the ignorant masses, perhaps, but revered among experts who understood the skills required and the risks run. We children mastered the deliberate misunderstanding, the planted pun, the Gracie Allen remark that can make of any interlocutor an instant hero.

How very gracious is the straight man! - or, in this case, the straight woman. She spreads before her friend a gift-wrapped, beribboned gag line he can claim for his own, if only he has the sense to pick it up, instead of - as happens nauseatingly often - pausing to contemplate what a nitwit he's talking to. Those men who recognize the ability for what it is, on the other hand, usually propose marriage on the spot.

-- From "An American Childhood," a memoir by Annie Dillard. Annie Dillard is the author of "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," "Teaching a Stone to Talk" and a forthcoming memoir, "An American Childhood."

Return to the Books Home Page