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Thoroughly Into Thurber:

Love, Not Money, Draws Collector to Literary Favorite Son
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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

Few people in Columbus know more about James Thurber than does Jay Hoster, who with his wife, Genie, owns Books on High.

In 1965, when Hoster left town to attend Haverford College outside Philadelphia, his passion -- obsession? -- for Thurber had yet to blossom.

"Whenever I'd tell anyone where I was from, the response would be 'Columbus who?' 'Ohio what?' Nobody had ever heard of Columbus," he recalled. "Then one day I was talking to a classmate, and he asked me where I was from. After I'd told him, he said: 'Columbus? Columbus, Ohio? That's James Thurber's hometown!' "

The classmate in question?

"A guy named Dave Barry," said Hoster, breaking into a smile.

Not long after his encounter with Barry, who eventually became a syndicated humorist writing for The Miami Herald, Hoster began to explore Columbus history and to collect all things Thurber.

He comes from an august Columbus family, the Hosters of 19th-century brewing. And he points to Thurber's unshakable ties to the city as a prime reason for his interest.

"Here you have a masterpiece of American humor, *My Life and Hard Times*, and all the stories are set right here in Columbus," Hoster said.

"Thurber never could get Columbus out of his mind, out of his writing," he said, reaching into a box for a facsimile program from the 1953 Ohioana Awards.

Included was Thurber's acceptance speech, which read in part:

"I have lived in the East for nearly 30 years now, but many of my books prove that I am never very far away from Ohio in my thoughts and that the clocks that strike in my dreams are often the clocks of Columbus."

Tacked to a wall in a corner of Books on High is a panoramic Downtown photograph shot immediately after the 1913 flood that Thurber writes about so hilariously in *The Day the Dam Broke* .

"Look at these pictures," said Hoster, holding photos of houses turned on their sides and upside down, bowled over by the raging waters of the Scioto River. "There was nothing funny about the flood, just loss of life and loss of property."

Still, “Thurber wrote brilliantly and humorously about the flood, and that’s how most people now know Columbus, if they know it at all -- as that place with the funny flood.”

His point: Thurber wasn’t all sunshine and yucks.

“He called it My Life and Hard Times, and I think he really meant it: ‘my life and hard times.’ “

Hoster reached into his box for another bit of Thurberiana, this time the Christmas 1912 edition of the East High School student magazine, The X- Rays -- to which Thurber contributed several humorous pieces.

The Thurber family may have argued about politics, Hoster surmises, and father Charles may have sided with the wrong candidate when he backed Teddy Roosevelt.

In any case, Thurber wrote in The X-Rays :

Dear Santy Clause:

I’ll tell you what I want for Christmas. I want one of those new-fangled bull-moosees that are for sale down town, an enlarged picture of my hero, Teddy Roosevelt, some books about Progressive politics, and some progressive emblems and buttons to wear on my coat so people will know what party I belong to.

May you make great progress in business this year!

Progressively yours,

James Progress Thurber

“This may be Thurber’s first published work of humor,” Hoster said. “And it was just like Thurber to turn a family disaster into something humorous. The thing about Thurber, it’s not ‘the good ol’ days.’ Columbus endured some pretty hard times, and so did the Thurber family.”

Hoster owns dozens of books written by the humorist, many of them first editions, and plenty of ephemera, including the crown jewel -- a turn-of- the-century photograph of mother Mary Fisher Thurber (aka Mame).

“It’s easy to start collecting Thurber because he wrote so many books -- more than 30, I think -- and your collecting can go in so many directions right from the start.

“And his first editions are, by and large, affordable.”

Yet the first editions -- the holy grails of compulsive collecting -- are not what primarily interests Hoster as a collector.

Many of his books are second, third, even fifth editions, which he treasures as long as they include something close to his heart -- a personalized inscription from Thurber to the original owner.

“For Noel Coward, / To be dipped in at intervals. / James Thurber” appears on the title page of a copy of The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze .

“So what if it’s a fifth printing and in poor condition?” Hoster asked rhetorically. “You get a bit of Thurber and a good pun, too.”

He has “broken just about every rule of collecting” with his copy of *My Life and Hard Times*, formerly the property of “The Fountaine Library, Suite 403, Grand Theatre Building, Columbus 15, Ohio.”

The book, which Hoster assumes was owned by a lending library, boasts the signatures of Helen W., Mrs. Charles L., Robert C. and William F. Thurber.

He bought it from an Akron dealer for \$450.

Since then, he has secured the signatures of grandchildren Sara Thurber Sanders, Rosemary G. Thurber and Mark Thurber Sanders.

“You’re not supposed to write in books,” Hoster said. “You’re not supposed to paste things -- like period postcards -- in books. I’ve done that with *My Life and Hard Times* .”

The book features Columbus postcards, circa 1913, as well as inscriptions from winners of the Thurber Prize for American Humor, including Ian Frazier and the editorial staff of *The Onion* -- not to mention other humorists, such as Adam Gopnik and Merrill Markoe.

“The genius of Thurber,” P.J. O’Rourke wrote in the book, “was that the insanity he described was normal for Ohioans.”

“This book,” Hoster said, “is still a work in progress.”

He believes firmly in reading the books he collects -- well, most of them.

“Thurber was so meticulous. He’d work over a sentence 20 or 30 times,” said Hoster, reading aloud from the opening of *The Night the Bed Fell* . “You take out one comma, and the whole thing falls apart. It’s just perfect.”

He has found enrichment in collecting Thurber -- in terms not of cash but of something intangible.

“If my heirs and assigns get out of my collection what I put into it, that’d be great,” Hoster said. “But that’s not why I collect. This is not an investment.”

His nearly three decades of collecting has yielded only happiness, too -- almost.

“My one regret is that it doesn’t seem the Hosters and Thurburs knew each other.”

Which seems a shame somehow.