

# STEPHEN LEACOCK ASSOCIATES

Awarding the Leacock Medal for Humour in Canada



## Gary Barwin, Leacock Medal Acceptance Speech

### Sunshine Kvetches of a Little Parrot

**Gary Barwin's acceptance speech on winning the 2017 Leacock Medal for Canadian Humour, June 10, 2017, at the Geneva Park Convention Centre, Ramara, Ontario.**

A rabbi, a priest and Stephen Leacock walk into a bar.

Wait, Stephen Leacock says. How did I get into this joke?

Don't worry, says the priest. You'll get used to it.

It's true, the Rabbi says. And in these jokes, we always walk into a bar. But I've figured something out. The bar is our lives. It's a metaphor.

Oh right, says Stephen Leacock. Of course. Then what's the punchline?

Exactly, says the Rabbi. That's the joke. We don't know.

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Since the Leacock Medal celebrates humour in literature, I'd like to take the opportunity to share some thoughts about the surprising and seemingly unrelated topic of humour in literature. In Yiddish, "to kvetch," means to whine or complain. So, in honour of the parrot narrator of *Yiddish for Pirates*, my friend, the writer Stuart Ross, told me that I should call this, "Sunshine Kvetches of a Little Parrot." Brilliant.

But first, of course, I'd like to express my deep gratitude to the jury, and everyone involved at the Leacock Medal. It's a great honour to receive this award. All those terrible puns and ridiculous stories that my friends and family have had to endure for all these years. But I'm extremely grateful to be part of this important recognition of Canadian literature and the rich history of humour here, going back thousands of years.

I'd also like to express my admiration for Drew Hayden Taylor and Amy Jones. It is a great honour to share the shortlist with them and I'm delighted that their fantastic books were recognised. Also, what a delight to share these last few days with the student writing winners. So funny and so talented.

I would like to thank Penguin Random House and my editors, Anne Collins and Amanda Lewis, as well as my agent, Shaun Bradley of the appropriately named Transatlantic Literary Agency for believing that this book could find land and then for helping me find it when none was certain. I'd also like to thank my parents and my in-laws for their years of support for my writing. And my daughter, Rudi, with whom I learned a lot on our many long walks when we discussed some of the themes in my novel. And finally, I'd especially like to thank my wife, Beth. This book, as well as just about everything else that I do, would not have been possible without her. What's worse than finding half a worm in your apple? A writer.

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I have just returned from a reading tour of China. I had a conversation with a Chinese interpreter about how she translates humour from English to Chinese. Sometimes, she said, the humour is untranslatable and so instead when she interprets she explains to the Chinese audience that the author has just told an untranslatable joke. And then she asks them to please laugh now in order to respectfully acknowledge it.

I think from now on, I'm going to use that for all my readings. Whether or not you think this is funny, I'll ask you to please laugh now to respectfully acknowledge my attempts at humour.

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We humans have discovered many things. Fire, language, agriculture, roller skates. War. Kindness. Art. And humour. Humour is one of our great technologies and it has accompanied us on our evolution from ape to Facebook user. Certainly, other animals have humour – a chimpanzee can appreciate the classic slapstick of a fellow chimpanzee slipping on a banana peel as much as the next Hedge Fund manager—but I think it is only we humans who see humour as saying something more.

Though life may be difficult, we can always take heart and watch people slipping on bananas. We may ourselves wipe out on a banana, but there is something satisfying about recognising how in falling we partake in “the human condition.” Though there are others we may wish would partake in this human condition more than us. Though we may despair, we can always laugh together as the powerful and self-important slide to the ground. It's hard to worry when you see how ridiculous things can be.

Ultimately, humour is philosophical, metaphysical, spiritual, social.

There must be a version of the story of Adam and Eve where before they ate the Forbidden Fruit, one of them first slipped on its peel.

There's an old Jewish story that I love:

A man goes to a Rabbi and asks if he can explain Judaism to him while the man stood on one leg. The rabbi sends him away saying, “Don't insult me with your ridiculous gymnastics.” Next day, the man asks the great sage Reb Hillel to do the same thing. Explain all of Judaism while I stand on one leg.

'Left or right?' Hillel asks.

'Either. Does it matter?'

'Tell you what, you jump in the air and while you're there, closer to God, I'll explain everything,' the sage says. 'Ready? Jump!'

And what does Hillel say while the man left the ground?

He says, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'

'That's it?' the man says as he returns to earth.

'That's it,' Hillel says. 'The rest is commentary.'

This is both a joke and a revitalising reminder. And just like the best humour, it cuts through all the commentary and pretension, and, ultimately, anxiety-producing complexity. And it's memorable.

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Humour gives us distance, and also an opportunity to deal with difficult things. Jewish humour, in particular, has a kind of optimistic pessimism, or pessimistic optimism, that is an integral part of the culture. There's an old saying "We laugh to keep from crying." And the Yiddish writer, Sholem Aleichem (on whose stories, *Fiddler on the Roof* is based) wrote that "Where there is laughter, there is hope."

We laugh because it gives us an alternative to despair. There's an old joke—

*Why don't Jews like to drink?*

*Because it dulls the pain.*

Life may be difficult and there may be pain, but it is our own pain. We claim our right to define our own experience on our own terms.

We may not always have had land, or power, money, or rights, but we always have had the ability to frame our experience. To claim it as our own. Perhaps to connect it to all others who have experienced adversity in other places and at other times. To look tragedy in the eye.

*What's worse than finding half a worm in your apple?*

*The Holocaust.*

It's a terrible joke, but the point of it is that instead of being driven to despair and hopelessness, we can look it in the eye. This isn't about minimising life's struggles, but it is about not allowing them to be in charge of our life, if only for a little while.

Through humour, we are able to stand outside what's happening and look at it philosophically. Through humour, we find a way to engage, to think about what is happening and still have agency. Many times humour addresses things we can't change and even if we can't change something, humour always gives us agency because we are the one telling the jokes. Or we are the one to whom to joke is told. That's a very powerful position from which to address pain, anxiety and tragedy.

I think of Woody Allen's line: *I'm not afraid of dying. I just don't want to be there when it happens.*

Humour is a way to keep going. The narrator of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* says, "I can't go on. I'll go on." Through his own awareness of the absurdity of life, and of his own absurd position in this absurd life, he finds a way to go on.

I love Beckett's dark and revealing humour. In his play, *Endgame*, a character tells this old joke: A guy needs a pair of pants and so goes to a tailor.

The tailor tells him to come back in four days.

The guy comes back four days later. "So sorry," the tailor says. "Come back in a week." In a week the guy returns, but the pants are still not ready. "Come back in a month."

This keeps going until finally, at the end of three months, the tailor brings him in to pick up the finished pants.

By this time, the guy has lost his patience. "It only took God six days—six days—to make the world. And you, you took three months to make me a pair of trousers."

"Yes, but my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look....at the world...and look...at my TROUSERS!"

Humour not only helps us to manage our expectations and to take agency, but it also builds relationships and community. If you tell someone a joke, you're sharing a perspective, you're in this together somehow. You're seeing something together. Even if you're only imagining telling the joke to someone you're reaching out and making a connection outside yourself. You're imagining fellowship and community.

Humour can dissipate tension or enable us to reexamine power relations. This is humour's jester-function: to speak truth to power, to reveal, to open up what is hidden or not spoken about because of power, convention, tradition, or ego. Often, it says what can't be said another way. It is socially sanctioned dissent, or to use Drew Hayden Taylor's term, "permitted disrespect." It allows us to see that the emperor's new clothes are all sizzle and no steak, all hat and no cowboy, and we see the naked truth, maybe in the emperor's case, too much of the naked truth.

Humour is revitalising because it allows us to see what isn't seen because of routine or convention. It calls out what we take for granted – both to critique and to appreciate. Maybe our own foibles or the foibles of our society. Humour is a tool to cause us to look at the world differently. It deconstructs assumptions and unexamined tropes. It "makes it strange" as the Russian literary theorist Victor Ostransky would say.

Humour also humanises. Something you can joke about seems less terrible, but also someone you can joke about seems less frightening or perhaps different.

You know those red security locks which lock onto the steering wheel of your car—The Club—to protect it from thieves? My wife, who is a criminal lawyer, had a client who stole a car fitted with The Club. The police began to chase him. Thing is, with the Club, the guy was only able to turn the steering wheel in one direction. And Hamilton is a city of one-way streets. So the police are chasing him and all he can do is turn left and left and left again as he tries to make his getaway but he can just spiral inward until finally, of course, the police catch up and arrest him.

Perhaps we can see some aspect of ourselves in this hapless car thief. We can relate somehow. We recognise ourselves or someone we know in that story. At the very least, the thief doesn't seem threatening or scary.

Here's one of my favourite poems. It's by an English professor called Martin Laba. It's called *Modern Poem* and it goes like this:

one, two,  
three, four, five,  
you idiot.

I like it because we can empathise with the feeling of having read something, perhaps a modern poem, something that is so hard to understand, that appears to be saying something that is willfully inaccessible or that appears so entirely pointless that it seems to be deliberately trying to make you feel like an idiot. I like the poem because of the nice twist, the surprise at the end, the shock of recognition. Oh yes, I know poems like this. And I know that feeling.

Another aspect of humour is the you-can't-fire-me-I-quit principle. When I make fun of myself, when I laugh at myself and my people, when I'm being self-deprecating, there's nothing you can say, because I got there first and have already defined myself.

My father used to be president of Planned Parenthood. Once, I asked him when is a Jewish fetus considered viable. He told me it was when it graduated from either Law or Medical school.

Once, when my kids were little we were celebrating Passover. There are a number of foods that it is traditional to have on the table. Each of them is symbolic of the Passover story which is about when the Jews were slaves in Egypt. And as the narrator of my novel says, you know what they say about being a slave...at least you have job security. But to return to the Passover seder, there is salt water which represents the tears of the enslaved Jews. There's a kind of nut and apple paste which represents the mortar the slaves used to build the pyramids. And there are two kinds of bitter herbs, used to represent the bitter life of the slaves. My kids asked me, "why are there two kinds of bitter herbs, what does the second one represent?" We looked it up. Why are there two kinds of bitter herbs? According to some old wise rabbis, the second bitter herbs are there so that children will ask questions. I love this answer. It is, of course, a kind of joke, but it also points to something that, at their best, both Judaism and humour do. It causes you to ask questions. It values surprise and new ways of looking at things. Like the scientific method, it asks, what if? And why?

In *Yiddish for Pirates*, I have my pirate and his parrot speak Yiddish. Why? Because of its inherent humour and its vitality, its ability to sum up the richness of experience and Jewish being-in-the-world. Wherever Jews went, with or without possessions, they also brought their language. And for me, Yiddish expresses a quintessentially Jewish irony and a fatalistic yet celebratory humour. They tried to kill us but instead, we lived and created a new holiday which we celebrate with good food and family. Life is hard but still, we're around and can tell jokes about it. My novel highlights this kind of humour amidst the darkness, a tool we can use in the face of abject adversity. Jews are often a pessimistically optimistic people. Is the glass half full or half empty? Full-shmull. As long as we have a glass.

In my novel, I adapted a few anecdotes from the memoir of a family friend, Erwyn Koranyi, who survived the Holocaust. One amazing story tells of how this Jewish guy named Dolly Heisler escaped the Nazis. Dolly said that the difference between someone who is a prisoner and someone who is not is that the prisoner looks unshaven and dishevelled and so he always kept razor blades in the lapels

of his jacket just in case he was picked up by the Nazis. One day, he was arrested. He was held for a while, but he had his trusty razor blades in his lapels and so he was able to keep himself clean-shaven and fresh faced. He heard a Nazi asking for an interpreter and so he stepped up and said, "I'm the translator. I can't wait to help do something about these stinking Jews." He spent the day translating and then when a driver appeared he asked, casually, if after work, he could get a ride downtown. The driver said, "Well, I can't give you a ride, but my boss, Eichmann is going downtown." And so this guy, Dolly Heisler, escaped imprisonment by the Nazis by getting a ride with Adolph Eichmann.

There's an empowering daring in this story, an escape that is resourceful, courageous and has a kind of insouciant bravura to it. But it's also funny. The surprise of it. The delightful empowering chutzpah of the guy.

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Finally, humour is about the pleasure of storytelling. The plot twists and delicious surprises. The opportunity to amuse and delight, to draw the reader in and lead them down the dramatic garden path. It enables the writer to confront difficult material, to give the reader a way in, and perhaps while entertaining them, rendering them open to a sneak attack of emotion or meaning. As Victor Coleman wrote of the work of Stuart Ross, "the message in the chuckle is a punch in the gut."

What's the difference between tragedy and comedy? I did some research. Mel Brooks says that "Tragedy is when I cut my finger, comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die."

There it is. The delicious surprise of the take-no-prisoners ending.

Which reminds me. There was this sailor, Yankeleh.

He leaves a pair of pants to be repaired baym shnayder—at the tailor. After seven years, now covered in scars and tattoos, he returns to pick up his pants.

They weren't ready.

"Gevalt!" Yankeleh exclaims. "It only took Adonai himself six days to make the world. You've had six years!"

"What's to say, now that the world is done?" the tailor replies. "So, nu, your pants are a tragedy . . . but at least we can talk about them."

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And that's the point. We can talk together. About pants. About the world. About our lives. We tell our stories and the stories of those we know. We tell stories about the way the world is and the way the world could be. Sometimes we tell easy stories, sometimes difficult stories. But always with compassion, intelligence, wit and humour.

To quote Aaron, my parrot narrator: "Ach, it's a life. A wonder tale. And we try not to notice that—can we help it?—all the time our tucheses are plonked in the sitz-bath of 'story.' You think, *genug shoyrn*, enough already. But nu. *Gey plotz*. What can you do? You try not to let tsuris—your troubles—make you old."

Which reminds me: A man goes to the theatre with his son.

“One adult and one child,” he says at the box office.

“That’s no child,” the ticket seller says. “He looks at least thirty.”

“I can help it that he worries?”

Often we tell our most important or our least important stories with humour. As I said, I believe that humour is one of the great technologies, one of the great tools of humankind. For investigation. For community. For keeping on keeping on. Our stories tell us that we’re in this together and together we tell our stories from beginning to our end.

So tell me, Moishe, your parrot—*alev ha shalom*—may he rest in peace, such a good imitator he was, what were his last words?

My parrot’s last words? What were my parrot’s last words? They were:

“Oy gevalt! I think my parrot is having a heart attack?”