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2012

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Recommended Citation

Stridh, Karina Louise, "Life as a Joke: In Defense of the Comedic Narrative" (2012). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 37.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/37>

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Life as a Joke: In Defense of the Comedic Narrative

“Did anyone see you wipe out?” my friend Matt asked me after I explained why I was limping to his table in the library a few nights ago, clutching a torn backpack and sporting a look so agitated it would’ve startled the grim reaper. I had just slipped outside on the pavement, you see. It was one of those sub-freezing evenings when the ground was slicker than a 1920s gangster hairdo and my ill-chosen ballet flats were evidently not equipped with the ice-skating capabilities needed to successfully traverse the quad on two feet.

“I hope so,” I responded.

I did hope that someone saw that spectacle—hey, if I’m going to live up to the blonde stereotype and make a fool of myself, I at least hope someone gets a little amusement out of my misfortune. A smile for a stumble: it keeps the universe balanced.

Of course, I did not always view embarrassing moments with nonchalance. During my less-than-glamorous pubescent years I was so convinced that I could fill up the “Cringeworthy Confessions” and “Embarrassing Events” sections of my favorite teen magazines with my own experiences that I would tear out those pages and promptly transfer them to the trash as soon as I laid hands on the magazines. I needed no reminders of teenage awkwardness above and beyond my own daily experiences, thank you very much.

That is, until I received my first book of the amazing young-woman series *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison. This work, a first-person narrative in the style of a diary written by protagonist Georgia Nicolson, details her confessions as a 14-year-old growing up in suburban England. Minus the setting, Louise Rennison might as well have been reading my thoughts as a young teenage girl. Whether Georgia was complaining about gym class (she too was forced to play “hockey—

otherwise known as the sick wanderings of a sick mind”¹), her inarticulate encounters with the opposite sex (“[Robbie] had landed at my door. I was wearing my Teletubby pajamas. He said, ‘Hi.’ I said, ‘Hhhnnnnngggggghh.’”²), even her far too accurate portrayal of teenage egocentrism (I cringe to recall that the statement “Everyone is so obsessed with themselves nowadays that they have no time for me”³ is so humorous precisely because of how much it resonated with my former, insufferable teenage self). It was from this series, which I devoured in days and reread more times over the course of my high school career than fully recited the pledge of allegiance, that I learned to embrace awkward situations for their comedic value, and begin my journey of writing my own humorous stories.

As I grew older, my love for comedic narratives stayed strong. By the end of high school, I owned every book of Louise Rennison’s series, and wanted to expand my collection of comedic narratives. It wasn’t too long until I came across Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Her loving friends are as well-meaning as they are moody; her father is usually good-intentioned and practical but often gives misguided advice; and her mother is a wonderfully overconfident and doting woman who often says things that hardly make sense. Reading this as a senior in high school, I saw direct parallels to the pleasant nuthouse that is my home. When not at Washington University, I cohabitate with 1) a generally loving sister who can go into such moods of passive aggressiveness you’d swear she was the iceberg that brought down the Titanic, 2) a dog who does not believe in the impermeability of glass doors, and 3) two nutty European parents. An example of their nuttiness, you ask? A personal diary entry from senior year titled “I Should Call Helen Fielding” recalls a night when, after asking where I was off to and listening to my joking response of “Oh, to break someone’s heart,” my mother responded with, “Ok, have fun now!” and my father chimed in with the oh-so-helpful, “I feel bad, that boy’s been so

¹ Rennison, Louise. *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging: Confessions of Georgia Nicolson*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000. Print.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

persistent... just tell him you're a lesbian." I do believe Bridget's father and my own would enjoy sharing pearls of wisdom. In any case, it was through reading the light tales of Georgia Nicolson and Bridget Jones that I learned to see life as a humorous string of embarrassing events, held together by my own retelling of these absurd events through writing.

In college, I expanded my collection of comedic narratives beyond the work of contemporary female authors. Now, I have learned to reach for my dog-eared *Candide* when feeling nostalgic for the French language, gleefully imagine what life would be like with the abandon and delicious wit of Dorian Gray after enjoying Oscar Wilde's masterpiece, and find reading Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* to be a perfectly fine excuse to forgo the gym. If that much laughter isn't an abdominal workout, I don't know what is. But my sincerest literary crush, the man who pierced straight to my heart by way of my funny bone, is undoubtedly Hector Hugh Munro. Saki, as was his nom de plume, inspired me as much with his brilliant imagery as with his wit. His observations of high society Victorian life in the so-called Golden Afternoon era right before the dawn of the World War I were so skillfully chosen and artfully described, one needn't have experienced it oneself in order to appreciate his jabs at society. My favorite character, thankfully recurring in many of Saki's short stories, is Reginald, a dandy with dilettantish taste and a tongue so sharp that most of his victims didn't even realize they were being skewered, much to the amusement of the reader. I like to think I would get along quite well with the man if I ever had the opportunity to encounter Saki. Alas, life goals are not without their obstacles; in this case that Saki was a noted misogynist, not to mention the tricky little hurdle of time travel.

Don't get me wrong, my literary interests are not at all limited to comedy. Ian McEwan has one of the most beautiful writing styles in recent literary history; I always have a copy of *The Things They Carried* on my bedside and I would surrender my entire expansive shoe collection before you made me forfeit my well worn *Franny and Zooey*. Nevertheless, I feel the need to defend the genre of the comedic

novel, which I believe to be severely underrated critically. Yes, an incredible amount can, should and is rightfully said about the great dramas, epics and romances that make up the majority of mandatory reading lists, but works of comedy should not be overlooked when determining the canon of great literature. These comedic novels and memoirs may not always be as emotionally heavy as their straight-faced counterparts, but their levity is not without its value. Personally, I've found these works to stop me from falling into the abyss of taking things too seriously. Comedic narratives point out the delightful absurdities of life, and, more often than not, beg us to see that almost every scenario has a bright side. Life is an utterly ridiculous journey—why cry your way through it when you can be laughing? My collection of comedic narratives might come across as haphazard, spanning genders and centuries and languages, but they all exhibit the virtue of brevity (whether the style of the narrative is via diary entries, short chapters or short stories) and make great use of a stinging whip of wit. These are two values I attempt to channel most in my own short story writing: it is because of these works that I always keep one eye open to the potential of humor. In a sense, these books have led me to regard my life as one big joke—and as I am the one making it so, with a pen in hand and a smirk on my face, I don't mind at all.

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