

Women and (or) humor

Sometimes, being funny means being brave

by Nancy A. Walker, Professor of English and Director of Vanderbilt's Women's Studies Program



Confronted with the task of writing 1,000 words on a subject on which I have probably written that many pages, I am reminded of Kate Sanborn, who in 1885 compiled an anthology she called *The Wit of Women*. When she mentioned her project to a peddler who stopped at her house, he said, "'Twon't be no great of an undertakin', will it?" (Sanborn's book is 215 pages long.) The moral of the story is that women's humor is a disappearing act. The next anthology of women's humor did not appear until nearly 50 years later, half a century after Sanborn published *The Wit of Women*. And then, in the 1970s, two earnest anthologizers published what they called the "first" collection of humor by women.

What is going on here? Is the term "women's humor" an oxymoron? More likely, I think, it's like a purple cow: you may see one, but your mind can't take it in. The man who laughs uproariously at Lily Tomlin can five minutes later turn to his girlfriend and ask, "Why don't women have a sense of humor?" Here lies the real clue, of course. His real question is not "Why aren't women funny?" but "Why don't women laugh when I'm funny?"

We don't have to adopt fully a theory that links humor with aggression to see that humor involves power. Even the simple act of trying to evoke laughter from another person (whether in print or in person) is an attempt to control that person's emotional or intellectual response, if only for a moment.

To point out someone else's folly or absurdity is to take on even greater power, and women have sometimes assumed this power at great risk. Such was the case with the early-19th-century humorous writer Frances Whitcher, who was inspired by the behavior of her minister-husband's congregation for some of her sketches; as a result, the Rev. Whitcher was asked to find a new flock. Dorothy Parker is still remembered for her verbal witticisms, but few of her friends felt comfortable turning their backs on her. The title of political columnist Molly Ivins' first book reflects the public response to her hilariously irreverent descriptions of Texas politics: *Molly Ivins Can't Say That, Can She?*

But Molly Ivins can, and does, and fully a third of today's stand-up comedians are women. Increasing numbers of comic strips are the products of women's imagination: *Cathy*, *Sylvia*, *For Better or For Worse*, *Where I'm Com-*

ing From. Bertice Berry and Kate Clinton, among others, perform regularly on college campuses, using humor to address racism and homophobia.

So, has everything changed since the days when Frances Whitcher's subjects recognized themselves in her satiric sketches and responded angrily? Not really. Almost all female stand-up comics report that they have to be very careful about the content and language of their routines lest they offend rather than amuse the audience.

Studies of the use of humor in the workplace show that women are far less likely than men to tell jokes, and then only when they are in positions of authority. And which of us has not been told to "lighten up" when we've refused to laugh at a sexist joke? In creating humor, women take on a power that some perceive as out of



character and dangerous. Rejecting a humor that denigrates women invites accusations of humorlessness.

Yet because humor reflects the culture of which it is a part, so too does the response to humor. Erma Bombeck once told me that she could tell that more men were assuming responsibility for housework — this was in the 1980s — because more of them found her "At Wit's End" column funny. They had discovered, in short, that washing machines do eat socks, and that repairmen never show up when scheduled. They could now relate to Bombeck's domestic humor. And no longer does a woman have to be self-deprecating (Phyllis Diller) or ditzzy (Lucille Ball) to be a comedienne.

Still, being a funny lady takes courage, as Dorothy Parker remarked many years ago. And this is true not only because the relationship between humor and power can put women in a precarious position. There are also disagreements among women about what kinds of humor serve us best. Is Roseanne Barr's persona crude or refreshing? Does the comic strip *Cathy* send the wrong message about women's ability to deal with what its creator calls the "four basic guilt groups" (men, food, career, mother)? Can Gail

Sausser's book *Lesbian Etiquette* be amusing to a heterosexual reader?

We might all answer these questions differently. The point is that humor is for women seldom pure "fun," an occasion for unfettered joy. Too much is at stake; too many people are watching. Humor, most would agree, is a means of survival — with it we fend off despair, fear and anger. This may be especially true of women's humor. But always balanced against humor's survival value is women's need to be taken seriously.

The contemporary humorist who negotiates this territory best for me is Nicole Hollander, creator of the *Sylvia* comic strip. Sylvia sees the rest of the world as absurd, and Hollander takes this very seriously. For instance, when a voice from Sylvia's television set intones, "The danger of a woman in authority wearing pants is that she may be confused with members of her staff," Sylvia fires back: "Not if she's wearing a tiara."

I figure that as long as Sylvia can keep from going crazy, so can I. ■

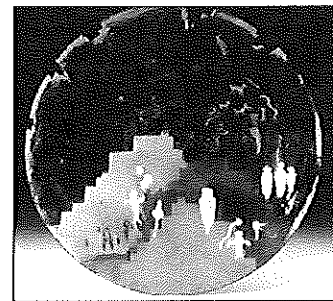
Art show to feature clay and metal



Clay artist Susan DeMay trims the bottom of a thrown piece

Peter Jenkins photo

On display in the Women's Center gallery from January 10 through March 1 are clay works by Susan DeMay and pieces in enamel on copper by Carole Robinson. A reception for the artists is Thursday, January 18, from 5-6 p.m.



Enamel on copper by Carole Robinson



Women's VU is published monthly September through June at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. Campus address: 316 West Side Row. Mailing address: Box 1513, Station B, Nashville, TN 37235. Phone: (615) 322-4843. Fax: (615) 343-0940. E-mail address: womenctr@ctrvox.Vanderbilt.edu.

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Nominations sought for mentoring prize

The newest and certainly one of the most meaningful honors given by the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center is its annual Mentoring Award. This award, which includes a small silver cup, will be presented for the first time this year to a member of the university community who fosters the professional and intellectual development of Vanderbilt women. The award will be made during National Women's History Month in March.

Nominations are now being accepted; forms are available at the Women's Center and at Sarratt's front desk. Deadline for submitting names is Wednesday, Jan. 31, 1996. For further information, please contact the Women's Center at 322-4843.

Help furnish a room of their own

The Women Law Students' Association (WLSA) of Vanderbilt Law School wants to refurbish its office to create a resource and study area for students. If you have a spare filing cabinet, desks, office supplies (files, binders, even small items like scissors or cleaning supplies), a chair or small couch, lamps, a small refrigerator, coffee machine, area rug, posters or any other useful thing, WLSA would be most appreciative of the donation. Please call Cindy McCombs McLean (385-1466) or Laurelyn Douglas (385-5861).

P.S. Anyone interested in applying to law school can also call the WLSA to be paired with a current woman law student willing to share her perspectives on the process.

J A N U A R Y

Calendar of Events

Margaret
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Please save and post. Individual flyers for these programs may not be sent.

- January 2 (Tuesday)
Creative Life Planning Group focuses on ways to improve problem-solving skills and make life changes. Members choose topics and lead discussions. New members welcome. 12-1 p.m. For more information call Judy Helfer, 322-6518. *Also meets Jan. 9, 16, 23 and 30.*
- January 8 (Monday)
Book Group meets to choose this year's reading list. New members welcome. 5:15-6:15 p.m.
- January 9 (Tuesday)
Proposal Writing Group for Women offers practical advice and moral support for women writing dissertation proposals. Facilitator is Dr. Nancy A. Ransom. New members are now being accepted. Second Tuesdays from 4-6 p.m. *Please see related article on page 4.*
- January 10 (Wednesday)
Art Exhibit Opening. The works of Susan DeMay and Carole Robinson go on display through March 1. Reception for the artists is January 18, 5-6 p.m. *Please see pictures on page 2.*
- January 11 (Thursday)
Early Birds is a monthly informal gathering with continental breakfast for students, faculty and staff. Mark your calendar for the second Thursday of each month, 8-9 a.m.
- January 12 (Friday)
Brown Bag Lunch for Staff and Faculty. The second Friday of each month is designated as a time for guests to meet the Cuninggim Center staff and learn about activities and programs. Men as well as women are invited to bring a lunch from 12-1 p.m.
- January 15 (Monday)
Dissertation Writers Group — Orientation Meeting. This ongoing group at the Women's Center offers moral support and problem solving for women writing dissertations. Meets third Mondays from 4:30-6:30 p.m. New members are now being accepted. For more information, call 322-4843. *Please see related article on page 4.*
- January 16 (Tuesday)
ABCs of Car Maintenance. Pat Claybaker, co-owner of The Workshop, offers tips on how to be a smart consumer of car maintenance. Light refreshments at 5:30; program from 6-7:30 p.m. Sarratt Student Center, room 118.
- January 17 (Wednesday)
To China and Back. Report with slides by Pat Pierce, director of the Opportunity Development Center, on her trip to the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in September 1995. 12-1 p.m.
- So, You've Always Wanted to be a Freelance Writer.** Workshop led by Amy Lyles Wilson, senior editor, Rutledge Hill Press, and Marge Davis, editor of *Women's VU*. Topics include practical tips, resources, what an editor looks for, how to approach a publisher, etc. Interest in forming a monthly group will be discussed. 5:15-7 p.m.
- January 18 (Thursday)
Artists' Reception for Susan DeMay and Carole Robinson. 5-6 p.m.
- McGill Hour: Healthy Dating Relationship?** Panelists are Matt Dudgeon, Julie Saliba, Anthony Lathrop and Bonnie McReynolds. McGill Dormitory. 6-7 p.m.
- January 24 (Wednesday)
Women and Travel: Business or Pleasure. Guerry Jameson, owner of Tours by Design, discusses special tours for women when they travel on business or for pleasure. 12-1 p.m.
- January 30 (Tuesday)
Women's Center Advisory Board meets at 4:10 p.m. in the Branscomb Private Dining Room. Sam McSeveney, chair.
- Women's Health Q & A: Maintaining Your Gynecological Well-Being.** Leader is June Gelpi, RN, Care Coordinator OB/GYN, GYN/Oncology. 5:30-6:30 p.m.
- Unless otherwise stated, all programs are held at the Cuninggim Center, Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row. For more information, please call 322-4843.*

In the library...

The life of Gloria Steinem, as told by another well-known feminist

Barbara Clarke,
Women's Center
librarian



Notable feminist Gloria Steinem is the subject of Carolyn G. Heilbrun's newest book *The Education of a Woman: The Life of Gloria Steinem* (Dial Press, 1995). Steinem is portrayed as a woman who was accidentally thrust into the limelight but who accomplished a great deal once there. Although she had not sought to become a celebrity, she is content to remain one in the interests of furthering the advancement of women.

Heilbrun, a well-known writer and professor emerita of English at Columbia University, illustrates the strong influence of childhood events on Steinem's adult life. Gloria was born in Toledo in 1934, the second of two daughters in a middle-class family. Her parents separated ten years later and, as her older sister was away at school, Gloria spent the next seven years being a mother to her own emotionally unstable mother. During these years they lived in working-class areas and had little money. Steinem's father

was a dreamer and a strong influence on his younger daughter.

After Gloria graduated from Smith College she spent a year in India, then moved to New York, where she became a freelance journalist and had many articles published in popular magazines. She was in her mid-30s when she identified with feminist causes and soon became known as an activist. In 1970 Steinem co-founded the Women's Action Alliance; the following year she helped found *Ms.* She began traveling widely, appearing at demonstrations, conferences and speaking engagements, on television programs and book promotion tours.

The media have always been drawn to Steinem, who is attractive and slim, with a pleasant personality. She is not threatening or confrontational, and the press do not see her as a stereotypical feminist. She has had a series of prominent lovers but has never married or had children.

Gloria has slowed down only a little now that she is in her 60s. Heilbrun, who had not met Steinem until just before she began work on this book, depicts her subject as a very likeable person who has worked tirelessly and selflessly for feminist causes for many years.

Shere Hite's most recent work, *The Hite Report on the Family: Growing Up Under Patriarchy* (Grove Press, 1995), deals with the changing family structure in the western world. This volume is based on responses to questionnaires completed by 3,000 women and men from 16 countries over a 15-year period.

Hite concludes that the family is not disintegrating; it is just changing in form. She feels that what was considered a normal family in the 1950s is not the only valid family structure. She believes that the diversity in family types "should be valued and encouraged; far from being a sign of the breakdown of society, it is a sign of a new, more open and tolerant society springing up."

Much of the volume is devoted to quotations from the survey's respondents, who describe in detail many aspects of their family lives. The chapters are arranged under four broad topics: early childhood memories, growing up female, growing up male and the changing family.

We have recently added a number of new videotapes to our collection. Most of these are accompanied by a curriculum guide or study guide.

The last weeks of the struggle for women's suffrage in Tennessee in 1920 are brought to life in *The Perfect 36. Alice Paul: "We Were Arrested Of Course"* illustrates how suffragist Paul and other members of the National Woman's Party fought to gain the vote for women. *Dating Violence: The Hidden Secret* is designed to educate teenagers about abuse and to give adults the skills needed to address this problem in young people. *Out For a Change: Addressing Homophobia in Women's Sports* examines homophobia and heterosexism in women's sports. *The Chilly Climate for Women in Colleges and Universities* discusses the subtle discrimination on campuses: the ways women are stereotyped, excluded, trivialized and devalued. ■

Help is available for ABDs ...

The Dissertation Writers Group, an ongoing program at the Women's Center, meets the third Monday of each month from 4:30-6:30 p.m. The group provides problem solving, troubleshooting and moral support for women writing their doctoral dissertations.

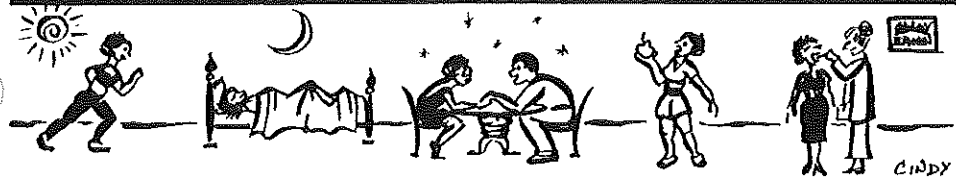
Dr. Nancy A. Ransom, facilitator of the group and director of the Women's Center, invites new members for the current semester. Interested women should submit a written request by January 5, including their campus, home and/or e-mail address, phone number(s), school, department and a half-page abstract.

New members cannot be admitted after the first meeting of the semester. However, if demand warrants, a second group will begin meeting on the fourth Monday of each month.

Proposal writers, too ...

The Proposal Writing Group, new last semester, meets on the second Tuesday of each month from 4-6 p.m. As with Dissertation Writers, new members are added only at the beginning of the semester. For information about either of these groups, call Dr. Nancy Ransom at 322-4843.

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Health matters

The fittest women may suffer from athletic amenorrhea

by Bonnie McReynolds, a graduate student in Vanderbilt's women's health nurse practitioner program, and a qualifier for the 1996 Olympic trials in the marathon (Feb. 10 in South Carolina)

It is ironic that women who exercise frequently are at a higher risk of menstrual disturbances.

Somehow one thinks that athletic, active women should be the epitome of health, but for some female athletes, a strenuous exercise program lowers their ability to have normal periods.

Amenorrhea, a type of menstrual disorder marked by the absence of menses, is more common in athletes than in the general population. For example, about half of elite runners do not menstruate. The factors contributing to this condition are many, and the interactions between them are complex and only partially understood.

Much as some of us joke that we'd welcome the chance to skip a few periods, amenorrhea is nothing to laugh about. Left untreated, it lowers a woman's chances of getting pregnant and reduces her bone mass, making her more susceptible to stress fractures and osteoporosis. And when, as is sometimes the case, amenorrhea is associated with an excessive program of weight control, it may point to yet another complex of emotional and physical disorders.

There are two classes of amenorrhea. Primary amenorrhea is diagnosed when a girl does not begin her periods before age 16; or else does not begin to menstruate nor develop secondary sex characteristics by age 14. Secondary amenorrhea, on the other hand, is the extended absence of

menses — no periods for at least three cycles or six months — in women who have previously menstruated. There are a number of possible reasons for this hiatus, including pregnancy, reproductive and pituitary abnormalities, and ovarian failure. When none of these other factors applies, the culprit may be stress-related — a condition known as hypothalamic amenorrhea.

Athletic amenorrhea is a form of hypothalamic amenorrhea specifically related to the physical and psychological stresses of training, although the mechanisms causing the disruption remain unclear. Researchers do know that the disorder is linked to a hormone known as GnRH, for Gonadotropin-releasing hormone.

Hypothalamic amenorrhea occurs when the GnRH is deficient, absent or inappropriately secreted in response to stressors. Normally the hypothalamus releases GnRH in a pulsating manner, which triggers certain other hormones, which in turn stimulate the production of estrogen and progesterone. When something happens to disrupt the release of GnRH, it unbalances the entire system. Unfortunately, scientists are still unsure what that "something" is, and how it is related to exercise.

Yet research shows that the connection does exist. According to studies of women who exercise, the major factor affecting the severity of menstrual disturbances is the intensity of the physical workouts. Other common risk factors include higher levels of psychological stress associated with training; training before menarche (that is, training before the first period); and delayed menarche. Irregular-

ities are also common among women who run, and among those who frequently skipped periods as teenagers.

Studies also suggest links with low body weight, low body fat, inadequate caloric intake and eating disorders — but once again, the precise nature of these connections remains unclear.

Because of the ambiguity surrounding the causes of athletic amenorrhea, treatment needs to be holistic — caregivers should examine the patient's menstrual history, nutritional and caloric intake and body weight and body fat, as well as the other psychological and physical stresses of an intensive training program. The caregiver may then recommend reducing the exercise program or eliminating it altogether; taking estrogen and progesterone supplements; increasing calcium intake; gaining weight; or a combination of these interventions until the body is returned to a balanced state.

Regular exercise should be synonymous with good health. Therefore, educating athletes, parents, caregivers, coaches and the community at large about the causes and consequences of athletic amenorrhea may not only increase the prospects for early diagnosis but improve the chances of prevention. ■

Birthdays of Notable Women

January

- 3 1793 Activist, pacifist and Quaker minister **Lucretia Mott**
- 8 1867 **Emily Balch**, Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1946)
- 9 1859 **Carrie Chapman Catt**, president (twice) of the National Woman Suffrage Association
- 15 1862 Dancer **Loie Fuller**
- 26 1872 Architect **Julia Morgan**, who designed Hearst Castle
- 30 1888 **Ella Deloria**, Sioux Indian linguist and anthropologist

Announcements

Conferences

National Feminist Exposition: Expo '96 for Women's Empowerment is Feb. 2-4 at the Sheraton Washington Hotel. Contact Eleanor Smeal, Feminist Majority Foundation, 1600 Wilson Blvd., Suite 801, Arlington, VA 22209. Tel: 703-522-2214 / 2219 fax; e-mail: femmaj@feminist.org.

Crossing Horizons Together, a leadership conference for women college students, is March 8 at MTSU. Keynote speaker is Harriet Woods. 1996 Tennessee Women of Achievement Awards will honor an outstanding student, faculty/administrator, and community member. *Send \$15 (includes lunch) by Feb. 15 to:* WLC, Box 295, MTSU, Murfreesboro, TN 37132. For info, call 898-2193.

Celebrating Difference, Exploring Commonality: Women's Studies in the '90s (annual conference of the South Central Women's Studies Association) is March 29-30 at the Univ. of Okla. For info, contact the Women's Studies Program, University of Oklahoma. Tel: 405-325-3481/5068 fax.

6th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women is April 22-26, Adelaide, Australia. Info: Box 986, Kent Town, South Australia 5071 Australia. Tel: 61-8-363-1307/1604 fax.

Internships

Legislative Assistant Internships with NOW's Legal Defense & Education Fund provide 10-12 weeks tracking legislation, drafting articles, etc. \$10/day plus great experience. Contact Vivian Lovell, NOW LDEF, 120 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, DC 20002. Tel: 202-544-4470.

The Nation Internships offer budding journalists experience in research, fact-checking, etc. *Deadline for summer 1996 is April 8.* Contact Peter Meyer or Sandy Wood, The Nation Institute Intern Program, 72 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10011. Tel: 212-242-8400.

Programs

Brenda Brown Groomes' dramatic presentation of civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer is 8 p.m., Jan. 25, in Sarratt Cinema. Co-sponsored by project Dialogue and the University Lecture Series.

Founders' Day: "A Woman's Medicine" is the Jan. 27 program of the Middle Tennessee Women's Studies Association. Speaker is Carol Gallaway. Meet for coffee at 9:30 a.m. in the faculty-staff dining room of Belmont University's Gabhart Student Union; the program follows at 10:30. For info, call campus representative Jan Rosemergy at 322-8240.

Etc.

TenneSenior Service Corps offers health education and screenings to low-income elderly. Earn a living stipend and money for school in exchange for a year of full-time service. *Application deadline is Jan. 8.* Contact Lizette Tucker at the Center for Health Services, 322-4848.

College Hotline provides confidential peer counseling, crisis intervention and referral services. Students dealing with depression, rape, stress, drug abuse, thoughts of suicide, etc., may call 255-LINE (255-5463) from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily. The hotline also needs volunteers to staff the phones. For more information, contact the Crisis Intervention Center, 244-7444.

Daughters, "a newsletter for parents of girls ages eight to eighteen," makes its debut this month. Features include parenting techniques, resources, health tips, interviews and reviews. For a year's subscription (\$25 for eight issues) contact *Daughters*, 1808 Ashwood Ave., Nashville, TN 37212. Tel: 800-829-1088.

Decisions teaches life-planning skills to women prisoners. Volunteers work one-on-one for eight weeks. Training is Jan. 27-28. For information, call Sonya Robinson at 352-7218.



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Women's VU

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