What's

Story by Sona Pai, BJ, BA '99
Photo by Erik Snowbeck

A man and a woman are lying in bed. He's looking away from her and frowning; she's glaring at him. A large seal leans over the headboard above them, gazing off into the distance. The woman says to the man, "All right, have it your way — you heard a seal bark."

This cartoon, a simple line drawing by the writer and cartoonist James Thurber, was published in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1932. It's one of Thurber's most famous cartoons, and it exemplifies the elusive humor *New Yorker* cartoons have become known for.

I don't get it. When I admit this to Michael Shaw, MA '92, I can tell he's disappointed in me.

Shaw, a marketing copywriter, cartoonist and frequent *New Yorker* contributor who lives in West Chester, Ohio, tells me that Thurber is his favorite cartoonist and that this is one of his favorite cartoons. In Shaw's C.V., or his "Cartoonium Vitae," he describes his own approach as "oblique, obtuse, absurd, irreverent," and he locates his work squarely within the Thurber tradition. In fact, when Shaw was just 8 years old, long before he knew of *The New Yorker*, he saw a collection of Thurber's cartoons and felt an immediate connection.

He remembers one in which a man is strangling a woman. Another man walks up and says, "Have you no code, man?" In another, a man slumps in his chair as he tells another man,

so funny?

The New Yorker magazine is known for its inscrutable, sometimes absurd cartoons. Mizzou graduate and cartoonist Michael Shaw has been in on the jokes since 1999.

"All right, have it your way—you heard a seal bark!"

"I never really rallied after the birth of my first child."

"I couldn't believe anyone would publish anything like that," Shaw says. "I knew they were funny, but I didn't quite know why."

Like Thurber, whose drawings often consist of blob-like figures and wobbly lines, Shaw says he's not much of an artist — it's not his illustrations that keep *The New Yorker* interested. Rather, Shaw's cartoons are all about the gag line. In describing Shaw's work, Bob Mankoff, *The New Yorker*'s cartoon editor said, "There are good, good cartoonists, and there are good, bad cartoonists. Michael is a good, bad cartoonist."

Shaw keeps an ongoing "gagalog," a running list of gag lines in need of illustrations. They come to him all the time, at his day job as a copywriter for catalogs like Frontgate and Grandin Road; while he spends time with his wife, Jennifer, BJ '88, and his children, Hannah, 11, and Liam, 7; and even while he's waiting in line for coffee. That's where he overheard a conversation that inspired his first official *New Yorker* cartoon, in which a prisoner with shackled ankles sits on a bed reading a book. The book's title is the gag line: *Chicken Soup for the Criminally Insane*.

When Shaw describes this cartoon to me, I can't help but laugh out loud. I also crack up when he describes the one in which a blindfolded man stands against a wall, smoking his last cigarette as he awaits a firing squad. A prison guard tells him, "There's no shooting — we just make you keep smoking."

Then, there's my favorite: A father reading a bedtime story to his daughter looks bewildered as the little girl asks, "Is the Itsy Bitsy Spider obsessive-compulsive?"

I think these cartoons are hilarious. They spark an immediate reaction, an instant smile, followed by laughter as my brain puts all the pieces together — the humor, the irony, the cultural commentary. I get them. And, being the kind of guy who thrives on making other people laugh, Shaw clearly likes that I get them.

But then I ask about the Thurber seal cartoon. I tell Shaw that I understand what's going on — the woman doesn't realize that the seal is actually in the bedroom. But, why is the seal in the room anyway? Why is that funny?

"Cartoons are like ink blots," Shaw tells me with a sigh, clearly disappointed that I don't share his gut-reaction appreciation of Thurber. "It's not that it's not funny, it's that you're not trying hard enough to enjoy it."

Hooked on comics

Shaw grew up in St. Louis, and he and his twin brother, Patrick, MA '88, started drawing comic books in elementary school. Inspired by Marvel Comics, they created

characters such as the Tranquil Four ("like the Fantastic Four, except they didn't do anything"), Torak, Son of Stone ("who was certainly nothing like Conan the Barbarian"), and Selvas Kane the Enforcer ("A classic tale of vigilante ninja justice!").

The boys made copies of their comic books on a mimeograph machine and tried to sell them at school, without much success. Shaw got his first taste of journalism in high school, when he wrote "a seething exposé on a grocery store that was notorious for selling cigarettes to kids." Titled "A smoltering reminiscence of days gone by" [sic] by "M.L. Shaw, esq.," the piece reads more like tongue-in-cheek nostalgia than investigative exposé, but Shaw insists it was "muckraking at its finest."

"[Journalism Professor George Kennedy] said I had 'an uneasy relationship with the truth,' and he recommended I try advertising."

Looking back on those early years of drawing and writing, Shaw admits that his writing was a little hokey and that his brother was the better artist, "but he's not in *The New Yorker*, so there."

Determined to be a "real artist," Shaw attended Webster University in St. Louis, where he earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in painting in 1980. He was drawn to surrealism and abstract expressionism, and his work was always creative, but never quite in line with his fellow students. When they were given an assignment to draw a skeleton of their choice, most of the students drew lifelike renderings of human or animal skeletons. Shaw drew a cartoonish illustration of a model of a solar system sitting on a desk.

"Their work was like something out of *Gray's Anatomy*, and mine was like something a first-grader had drawn," he says. "But I liked what I drew!"

After graduating, Shaw took off to Greece for a year to teach English and figure out what to do next. There, he sold his first cartoon to the magazine *The Athenian*. It was a spot drawing (no gag line) of a waiter carrying a tray. When he returned to St. Louis in 1982, he began teaching art in middle schools and submitting cartoons to *St. Louis Magazine*. His first published cartoon with a gag line was of salmon swimming upstream. One salmon turns to another and says, "You know, lately I've been considering a celibate lifestyle."

"Getting published was amazing," Shaw says. "I felt validated, and I felt that euphoric kind of excitement that only a writer or I guess a heroin addict feels. I wanted more."

"The Feds have authorized me to leave your child behind."

At the 'Zou

After teaching for four years, Shaw was ready for a career change. Patrick and some high-school friends had attended Mizzou, and he knew that the School of Journalism was seeking graduate students from different backgrounds. Along with his graduate application, he wrote a letter daring the J-School to let him in, and the school's admissions office accepted the challenge.

Shaw began his graduate studies undecided and then set his sights on advertising. He says his decision was influenced by a comment from faculty member George Kennedy. Now a professor emeritus, Kennedy was chair of the editorial department, associate dean and managing editor of the *Columbia Missourian*. "He said I had 'an uneasy relationship with the truth,' and he recommended I try advertising," Shaw says.

In the advertising department, Shaw worked closely with longtime advertising faculty member Henry Hager, a former associate professor who is now a professor emeritus. "I have him to thank for my failed career as a full-time cartoonist," Shaw says. "He made me too good at copywriting."

As he made his way through the advertising sequence, Shaw never stopped cartooning. He was staff cartoonist for *Sunday*, the weekend magazine of the *Columbia Missourian* at the time, and he had a regular

cartoon strip in *The Maneater*, called "At the Zoo," which he calls "a delightful comedy of manners" about an opossum, an alley cat, and an elite community of blue-blood animals such as kangaroos, giraffes and a stork.

"I aspired to be obscure and memorable," Shaw says. "I know I succeeded at the obscure part."

Hager remembers Shaw as "a gentle soul with a sharp, incisive wit." The two kept in contact after Shaw left Mizzou but lost touch after a few years. Then, almost a decade after Shaw graduated in 1992, Hager began spotting Shaw's cartoons in *The New Yorker*.

"I like his cartoons and the subtle nudges and nuances he achieves," Hager says. "Sometimes, you wonder if you got it, but when you do get it, it's sure to be a revelation."

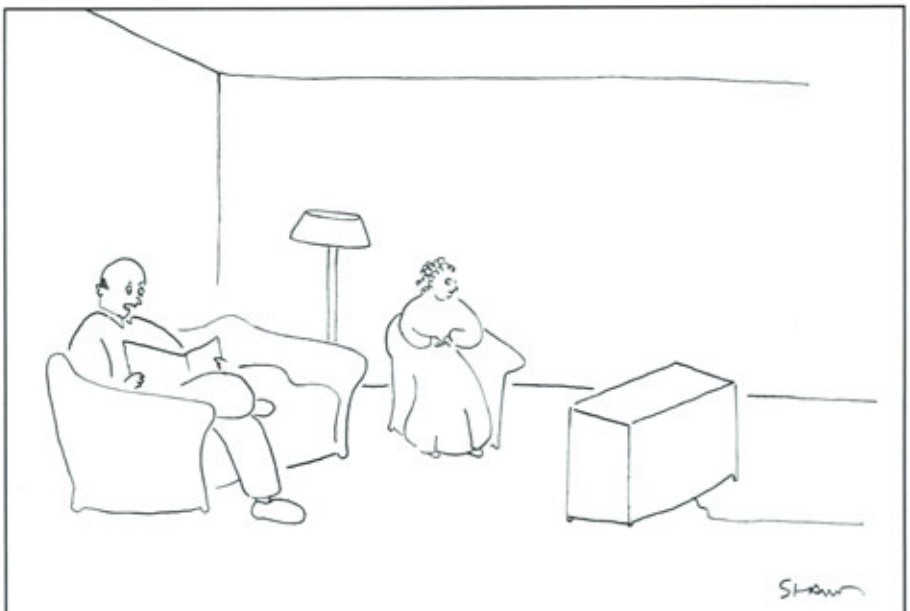
During his time at MU, Shaw worked with the University's two most famous cartoonists. Under the guidance of *Beetle Bailey* creator Mort Walker, BA '48, he went door-to-door conducting research to determine how a comic strip's size affected readership. And Frank Stack, noted underground comics artist and professor emeritus of art, was a member of Shaw's master's thesis committee. His thesis, "Who Calls the 'Toons?" explores the effects of syndication on comic strips.

Shaw was fascinated with the history and great artists of cartooning, and even though he followed the career path of a copywriter, he never abandoned his dream of cartooning. The more he learned about the practice of journalism, the more depth and meaning he infused in his simply drawn cartoons.

"I remember hearing George Kennedy say, 'Your task is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,' " Shaw says. "I still aspire to that goal in my cartoons."

The right gag at the right time

After graduating, Shaw worked as a copywriter for a medical device company and then for the Lands' End catalog, where he often got to write magazine-style stories. Lands' End sent him traveling across the



"Gays and lesbians getting married—haven't they suffered enough?"

"Can't we put in something about rich white guys don't have to pay taxes?"

country with his family in an Airstream trailer to write about the Great American Vacation. The catalog also jetted him off to Lake Como, Italy, to write about silk ties. He even got to write captions for a few cartoons, including one that the catalog purchased from a *New Yorker* cartoonist. The cartoon shows Santa Claus and his reindeer on a runway between a couple of airplanes, with one reindeer talking to another. Shaw's gag line: "How long is our layover in Cleveland?"

By the mid '90s, Shaw had submitted a few cartoons to *The New Yorker*, which he calls "the Sistine Chapel, no, the Vatican of cartooning," only to receive baseball-card-sized rejection letters that read, "We regret we cannot use your material."

Shaw began studying back issues of *The New Yorker*, dissecting each cartoon and trying to peg each cartoonist — the one who could really draw, the one who captured the zeitgeist, the one with the pithy sayings, etc. True to his Thurber-loving roots, he was most drawn to the ones with so-so illustrations and inscrutable gag lines, and these are the kind of cartoons he continued to submit.

"I was the guy in the '90s sending them cartoons that looked like they came from the '30s," he says.

He submitted for another year with no luck, and then he got his chance — a contest. The Algonquin Hotel in New York would choose three winners from submissions of hotel-themed *New Yorker* cartoons. The winners would get a weekend at the hotel and a chance to meet the magazine's cartoon editor, as well as some of its most popular cartoonists.

Shaw submitted about 25 cartoons, one of which was selected as a winner. In his winning cartoon, which was never published, a sign hangs on the doorknob of a closed hotel room door. The sign reads: "Already Disturbed."

A year later, *The New Yorker* officially accepted its first cartoon from Shaw. Since then, 61 of Shaw's cartoons have been published in the magazine, and a number of others have been purchased but not published.

In one of the cartoons purchased but not published, a group of pilgrims sit praying at a Thanksgiving meal. The gag line reads: "We thank the lord for everything except these silly hats." Because he's got a million gag lines, thanks to his trusty gagalog, Shaw even included an alternative for the same drawing: "Lord, I hate theme dinners."

In the laugh of the beholder

In a classic episode of the television show *Seinfeld*, Elaine — who, coincidentally, writes for a literary-inclined clothing catalog and ends up submitting a cartoon to *The New Yorker* — becomes irritated when she reads a *New Yorker* cartoon that she just doesn't get. She becomes so irritated, in fact, that she takes the cartoon to an editor at the magazine and demands an explanation.

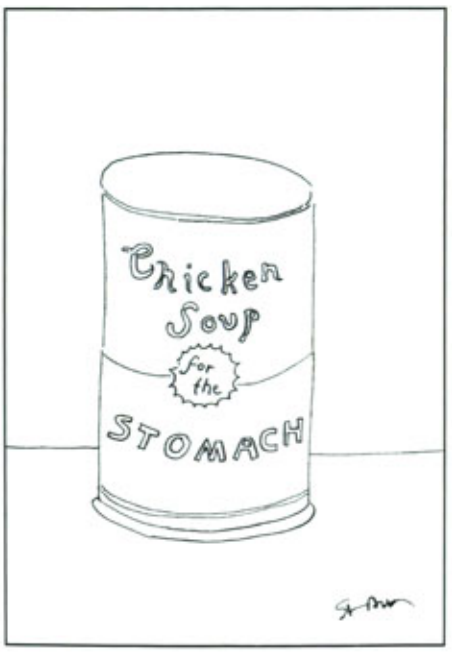
The cartoon depicts a dog and a cat in an office. The cat says, "I've enjoyed reading your e-mail."

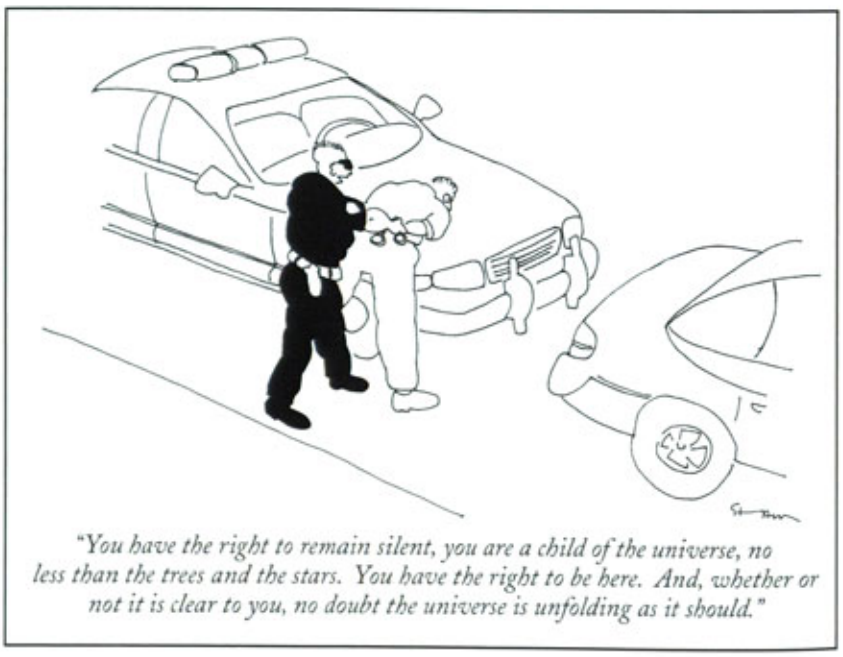
When confronted, the editor says, "That's a rather clever jab at inter-office politics, don't you think?"

Elaine still doesn't get it. "Why is this supposed to be funny?" she asks.

The editor struggles to answer the question with some authority: "It's merely a commentary on contemporary mores. ... It's a slice of life. ... a pun?"

Elaine keeps pushing him, certain that he has no idea what the cartoon means. Finally,





"You have the right to remain silent, you are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars. You have the right to be here. And, whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should."

the editor relents. He admits that he doesn't get the cartoon either. He just liked the kitty.

The cartoon is an apt example of the kind of non sequitur *New Yorker* readers have become accustomed to and some have even grown to love. It also reflects a common theme in *New Yorker* cartoons — office humor — which Shaw often features in his cartoons. Other recurring themes in his work include a couple watching television, kids saying the darndest things and guys in prison.

Shaw often riffs on the news of the day in his cartoons, which have touched on issues like the war in Iraq, gay marriage, outsourcing and even the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. Shaw submits 30 to 40 cartoons a month to *The New Yorker*, but before he sends one in, he often runs it by his wife.

"If I really like one, she'll usually say she doesn't understand it, and if she did understand it, it's not funny anyway," Shaw says. "Those are the ones they buy."

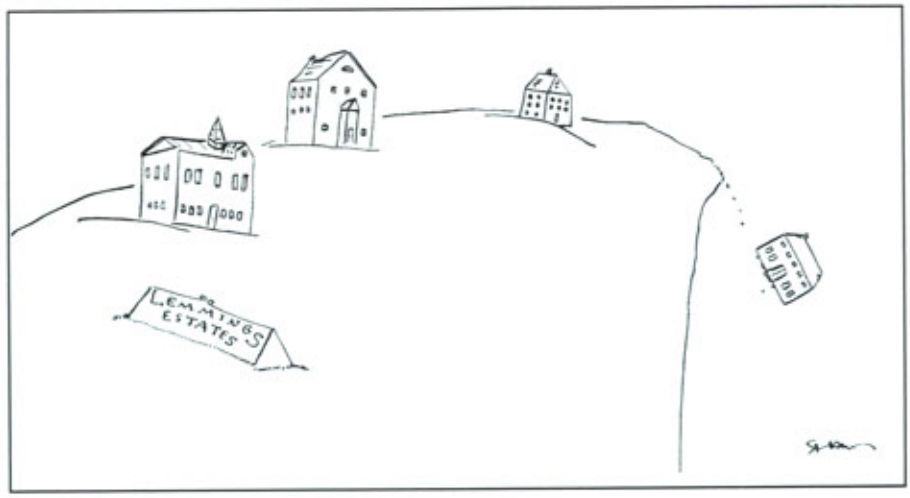
Looking over Shaw's published cartoons — all of which are available at cartoonbank.com, where Shaw is also a freelance copywriter — I find most of his work pretty funny for its relevance to current events, its incisive jabs at political figures and its pure, laugh-out-loud humor. There are only a few that I just don't get, which brings us back to Thurber's seal.

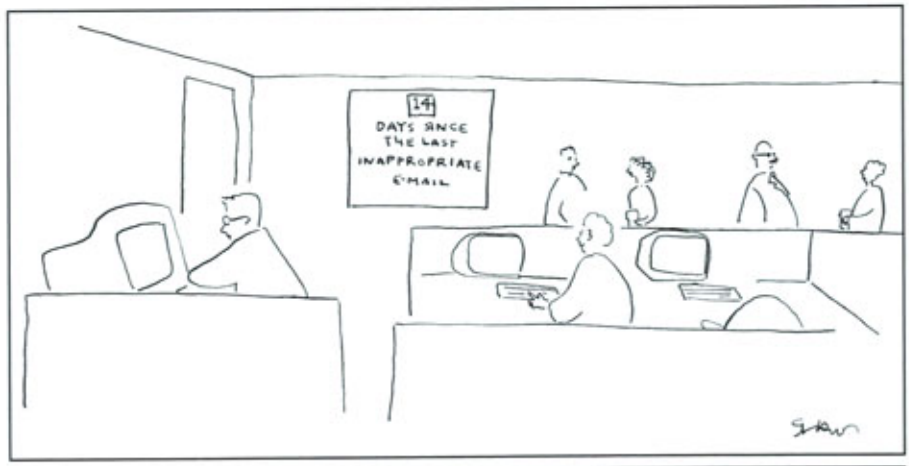
Like Elaine, I just can't leave this one alone. I want to understand why it's so funny. Is it about marital strife? Is it about realism vs. fantasy? Is it just funny because there's a seal in the room?

To answer my question, Shaw paraphrases *New Yorker* essayist E. B. White, who as it happens, was James Thurber's officemate and the first person to recognize greatness in Thurber's clumsy doodles.

"What makes them funny is indefinable," Shaw says. "I prefer to just accept it. It's like E.B. White said: Humor is like a frog. You can dissect it to see how it works, but by then, it's dead."

About the author: Sona Pai is a freelance writer and editor in Portland, Ore.





"It was the featured wine in the movie 'Barfly.'"