

## Michael J. Rosen

More Mirth of a Nation  
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### One-on-One with Michael Rosen

(Some questions remain unanswered due to natural reticent or general impatience.) **What's up with this "biennial" thing? You say Mirth of a Nation is a biennial: is that the same thing as a "biannual"?** First of all, as Henry Alford acknowledges in his "Question for Reading Groups," that ends the present volume, people are made uncomfortable by biennials. They think, "Isn't that just a book that's afraid to own up to the truth about itself? Wouldn't it be happier being a heteroennial." No, a biennial is simply a book published every other year rather than twice in a single year. **Does your book have anything to do with the D. W. Griffith film "Birth of a Nation," that epic silent film of the early twentieth century that documents the plight—** No. **So what's the next volume going to be called, *Still More Mirth of a Nation*?**

Perhaps. We are considering other titles as well:

*AfterMirth*

*The Day the Mirth Stood Still*

*Mirth She Wrote*

*Mirth III: I Don't Care who Started It*

*Make Mine Mirth*

*Mirth Girls Are Easy (all female contributors)*

*Gold, Frankincense and Mirth (our holiday collection)*

*Mirth III: This Time It's Personal*

**Does it take one to know one? All right, let me rephrase that: Assuming you need a good sense of humor to edit humor, where'd you get yours?** Assuming I have one, from my father. He was an archivist of jokes, remembering not just great stories, but the tone and language necessary to bring each joke into a temporary believability... before delivering the punchline. We would come to the table as kids, all excited to tell a new joke or story, and my father would already know several variations on whatever it was — not that he would ever let on; he let us roll out the whole joke, perhaps to give us practice. He also had a marvelous ear for accents: Yiddish, of course, but also Indian, British, Appalachian, octogenarian: he brought more of the world to our home than I might have otherwise met in Columbus, Ohio. While I don't have his memory for jokes, I have always enjoyed imitating and acquiring bits of others' speech or dialect. Finally, I think I learned about timing from my father: his was nearly perfect. He never rushed a story, sensing the real pleasure in building anticipation. But he never managed to show off, either. He held his stories in closed reserve: either he would begin a joke pretending it was a genuine bit of news to relay, or someone else would tell a joke and my father would simply follow suit, as if to return the pleasure rather than to steal the show. During dinner, other families discussed politics, watched television or discussed neighborhood gossip, but at our kitchen table, joke-telling was as important thing as finishing everything on your plate. **How's this book different from other humor anthologies?** First, this is a series rather than a giant compendium — yet it is close to gigantic at almost 600 pages — and *Mirth of a Nation* has the luxury of collecting only new work by the most engaging people working today. There's no obligation to survey history or choose highlights from the annals of a particular subject matter or group of people. And it's strictly humor writing: while I love great stand-up work, cartooning, witty dialogue and the rest of the comic gamut, this book's focus is on written humor. (I avoid saying "literary" humor, since that can sound too highbrow, though that word might suggest how the majority of the pieces have been previously published in magazines, newspapers and online journals. About a quarter of the work appears in this anthology for the first time. **One reviewer of the first volume praised the book by saying "it's perfect bathroom reading." Why is humor always thought of this way? Does it have, well, laxative properties? I suppose humor is a release, of sorts. I guess I answered my own question, never mind. You've been quoted as saying "Humor is a high-wire act." (Actually, you've been quoted as saying so many absurd things, but we don't have the space or energy to consider more than this one.) What did you mean?** It's a bravura act, the solo when the principal dancer comes center stage for the 45 seconds of grand leaps and spins while the corps de ballet retreats to the wings. When you do humor, people are saying, "Oh, would you look at that!" And sometimes they follow with, "Hmmm.. well, that wasn't as high as it should have been." Humorists must recognize that the audience is paying especial attention because the author (or the title of the magazine feature, such as "Last Laugh") has come forward and announced that something funny is about to happen. So stakes are higher. The vocabulary and tone must be flawless. The writing must be finessed from average speech just as ballet is finessed from the generally coordinated way we conduct our bodies. This requires practice and stamina as rigorous as that of principal dancers in the ballet. All right, not quite as rigorous, but it's still demanding and you don't have to wear leotards or tape up your bony feet like some UPS package you're shipping off to your daughter in the Peace Corp. **Speaking of bones, do people really have a funny bone?** Yes, it is one of the bones of the inner ear: the hammer, the stirrups and the funny bone, the cochlea: Maybe it's just the funny-named bone — who knows. Still, it's safe to say that humor requires a great ear, and that's where I'd place the "sense" of humor if it were going to pay its union dues and join up with the five other senses.

And is this the right time to say that there will be a six CD set of audio highlights from the first two biennials released at the same time as *More Mirth of a Nation*?

—It's not? Well, it's called *Mirth of a Nation Audio Companion, Fellow Traveler and Friend for Life*, and some 50 works are read by Tony Roberts, Susie Essman, Martha Plimpton, and a few of the authors themselves, including David Rakoff, Mark O'Donnell and Cynthia Kaplan. **Here's kind of a follow-up question: Have you found that the funniest people are also the most ticklish?** I have not been invited to tickle most of the contributors, so I cannot say. Of those I have tickled, it has been purely in a flattering sense. Just to head off your next question, I have no idea why "tickled pink" is preferable to being tickled any other color. **What's your favorite color?** Mustard. Also the whole spectrum of yellow-oranges from squash blossom to tangelo. **Who's the funniest writer alive?** Pass. *More Mirth of a Nation* includes work by nearly 70 authors. I'm obviously incapable of narrowing down the field to a single favorite. **Who's the funniest writer dead?** Some people would be funnier dead than alive, but that's not what you asked, is it? **What's so funny?** Like most answers to imponderable things, it's easier to answer the opposite question or the converse to describe the dough shapes left after you punch out the heart-shaped cookies. On the mirth-of-a-nation.com site, I try to maintain a list of references that, at least to my tuned-in or tin ear, fall flat. For instance, recent additions (and they may be out of date by the time you read this) include: Justin Timberlake, Taco Bell, Canada, those two Canadians that got the gold and silver in skating, Rosie and her magazine, Rosie and the pussycats-oh, wait, that was Josie!, well, pussy cats in general, Subway, teriyaki, dude, Dell (and any expression from the commercials with that expressively faced Steven), Barry Manilow (making his third appearance on this list), Anna Nicole Smith (and breasts in general; they're just not that funny. Call us old-fashioned as Dame Edna Everidge would say. Go on.), Julia Roberts, powerbars, abs, ab machines,

all those cable TV aerobic instructors who only have first names, Aflac, Ben Affleck (Matt Damon may have one or two uses left before joining his buddy on this list)... **Is it true what they say, "you had to be there?"** I often read submissions, or whole books, from very fine writers whose primary resource for humor is one or another occurrence: "A funny thing happened to me, and let me tell you about it." Some of this can be funny, but so much anecdotal experience doesn't work on the page. The humor that we experience at parties or in conversations is spontaneous and contagious and volatile. But that rarely represents the method of composition a writer uses working at the sentences hour after discouraging hour, getting the humor down. In this new book, I did find great examples of seemingly real encounters or occasion turned or twisted into humor: "A Fish Story" by M. Sweeney Lawless, Michael Thomas Ford's youthful preparations for the Second Coming, Merrill Markoe's Tibetan healing involving drinking water, prescriptions and skin creams. **So, you're spending your time editing humor? How come you don't edit something serious and important?** The age-old bugaboo about humor writing goes like this: comedy isn't a serious form, while tragedy is. In the scholarly words of Louis D. Rubin Jr. (no other scholarship is included in the book unless you count Randy Cohen's astoundingly savvy "Unnatural Histories" or Louis Phillips' translation of Aristotle's treatise "On Baseball"): "Thalia, the muse of comedy, has always been something of a wallflower in critical circles, and the attention has gone principally to Melpomene and her more glamorous celebrants of tragedy." And so *Mirth...* and *More Mirth of a Nation* make another claim: That humor writing is seriously funny. Now of course I mean "genuinely" funny, but I also mean also "seriously" as in "profound" — humorists are among the few dependable sources of honest (re)calibration and reality checking. Their cagey, conniving, unparaphrasable words reveal something truer than our hurried lives allow. Are you with me? **Go on. Don't let me interrupt.** Humor (thank you) is a sign of life, a vital sign. A sign that there's one life we imagine for ourselves and another life that we end up living, and there, within that discrepancy, resides one form of limbo or another. Either you see it as the unfunny Catholic kind of limbo, where your hapless soul languishes between heaven and hell with only Melpomene for company ... or you see it mirthfully as the West Indian sort of limbo, where you say, "oh what the hell," grab the hand of Thalia — that bashful wallflower beside the bowl of rum punch — bend over backwards and do your tourist best to dance under the bar.

My hope in this new series is to preserve and perpetuate just these shorter pieces of humor most often considered the filler of magazines or airtime, but which are, in fact, essential supplements to our well-being. **We're running out of time — (aka patience). One more question: Is it easier or harder to write funny in these days where politics itself has the irony?** Harder, or so I hear from many colleagues. The political culture (outside of the terrorism and September 11th, for obvious reasons) is so overripe and ludicrous that invented humor can't keep up with it, can't take it to task with yet more humor. How can you top the facts of recent politics? Journalism has assumed the deadpan role of the humorist's material; straight-faced reporting seems to be the best presentation, letting the facts tell the jokes themselves. And, how can you riff on something that the media has already mocked and mimicked into a numb state? So if a humorist had thought to push an idea into the realms of absurdity, in hopes of drawing out the humor, in hopes of awakening all of us to the apparent dangers, well, too late: the politicians have, as if on a soap opera, already taken things too far. Still, people do prevail: folks such as Will Durst, Andy Borowitz, Joe Bob Briggs, the folks at *The Onion* and many others who really have the confidence and prowess. **Still one more question: What are the most common reasons you decline work? What's wrong with what I sent you?** Of the many fundamental pitfall, two enjoy a particular popularity. One is just showing off with humor. A ranting pitch or a merciless parade of obscurity and verbal chicanery or choosing a subject that's so unfamiliar to the audience that the writer ends up spiking that ball of words onto your side, and that's that. The other players — the readers, that is — aren't even able to return the ball. It's peremptory, it's selfish, and all too often it's not nearly as smart as the writer imagines it to be.

The other problem is performing humor with so little authority, confidence or freshness that the writing is like an interminable game, one where the reader knows exactly where the ball is going to land and, after a while, doesn't even bother trying hard to keep it in motion. The writer lulls the reader through the piece of humor as though it were kindergarten ("OK, everyone line up over here; everyone wash your hands . . ."). The majority of the pieces that I turn away for *Mirth of a Nation* are not poorly written or lacking humor in some way, but ultimately they're too predictable, and the author or the idea runs out of that sort of original, inventiveness that keeps the game exciting, with the ball continually in play. **Question III: This Time It's Personal: Can anyone submit work for the next volume?** I invite readers and writers to take a look at this new volume and to share their work or favorite pieces by others for future volumes. Send materials with a self-stamped, self-addressed envelope to P.O. Box 35, Glenford OH 43739. **Ohio?** Ohio happens to be a hotbed of humor. ...?

Ian Frazier, Mark O'Donnell, Andy Borowitz, Gregory Hischak, Michael Francis Martone (all in the first two volumes) and that's just for starters since I don't even know where most of the contributors were born. Oh, and James Thurber, who certainly could be the greatest dead humorist. And my father.