

Jan. 24 continued....

The **St. Louis Poetry Center** sponsors a poetry reading by **Ed Boccia & Chris Ortiz**, Focal Point, 2720 Sutton, 7:30pm, 636-225-5423.

Wednesday, January 25

SLPL Central Branch Book Discussion Group discusses *Hundred Secret Senses* by Amy Tan, 1301 Olive, Mtg Rm 1, 4:30pm, 539-0396.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Joseph Ellis** discusses his book *His Excellency: George Washington*, SLCL Headquarters, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 7pm, 994-3300.

Thursday, January 26

SLPL Schlafly Book Discussion Group discusses John Dalton's *Heaven Lake*, 225 N. Euclid, 7pm, 367-4120.

Jim Baker discusses his book *King Trolley*, SLCL Headquarters, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 7pm, 994-3300.

Friday, January 27

Kaye Gibbons discusses book *The Life All Around Me* by *Ellen Foster*, LBB, 399 N. Euclid, 7pm, 367-6731.

University City Great Books Discussion Group discusses *Growth of Hate* and *Spring Sildworms*, 6800 Washington, 8pm, 994-7914.

Saturday, January 28

Write Along Writers Workshop welcomes writers of all genres and levels to share and

learn, SLCL Indian Hills, 8400 Delport, 11:30am, 428-5424.

SLPL Buder Branch Book Discussion Group discusses *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, 4401 Hampton, 1pm, 352-2900.

Sunday, January 29

WU Contemporary Fiction & Non-Fiction Reading Group discusses *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a memoir in books* by Azar Nafisi, 2-4 pm, WU West Campus Library, Moog Lounge, 481-0730.

Notices

The Wednesday Club of St. Louis is sponsoring an **original poetry contest**, submissions accepted until Feb. 1. For details go to www.wedclubpoetrycontest.org.

St. Louis Short Story Contest offers a grand prize of \$5,000 & publication by Clean Slate Publications. 3500 word max, submissions accepted until May 19. For details, go to www.stlshortstory.com.

VSA of Missouri is looking for a **volunteer writing teacher** for their program at the Jefferson Barracks Hospital. Contact Alice Neaf at 481-0730 for details.

Abbreviations:

B&N: Barnes & Noble; LBB: Left Bank Books; SLCL: St. Louis County Library; SLPL: St. Louis Public Library; WU: Washington University.

Check the online calendar at cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu for more events. To advertise, send event details to lital@artsci.wustl.edu, or call 314-935-5576.

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The Center for the Humanities
Campus Box 1071
Old McMillan Hall, Rm S101
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO 63130-4899
Phone: (314) 935-5576
email: cenhum@artsci.wustl.edu
<http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu>

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Speaking of Humor and Power

One of the early ways I tried to improve my spoken English was to watch television. This sounds easy, but my graduate studies and a part-time job made it hard to find the time and the right program: something late at night with dialogue that was not too fast or difficult. One program that fit the criteria was *The Love Boat*. The series was in reruns by the time I first watched Captain Stubing steer the *Pacific Princess* toward the many “exotic ports of call” that made up the set. Although it was full of cheesy romance and famous guest stars I did not recognize, I liked the idea that some of the characters who were unattached at the beginning would fall in love with each other by the end of the show.

But the lessons I learned watching *The Love Boat* went beyond pronunciation: I learned something about humor because that program was one of the first hour-long series to use a laugh track. Often I did not find anything humorous when the “audience” laughed, so I began asking my husband what was funny. This drove him crazy at first, but gradually we entered into discussions about what constitutes humor in different cultures. The easiest for me to comprehend were those jokes caused by the words themselves, as in puns and jokes

that depend on *double entendre*. Once I understood the multiple meanings of the words involved, they were fairly easy to understand. The more complex moments where the “audience” laughed, the ones where I understood all the words but had no idea what they were talking about, led our discussions to the context-dependent nature of humor.

Humor is relative. No event, person, or thing is intrinsically humorous. Thus, what one culture finds amusing may or may not be funny in another. Trying to grasp humor in a culture with which one is only superficially familiar is hard because an important part of humor requires the ability to understand a situation from a multitude of perspectives. The tension exploited by *The Love Boat* humor was that between an earlier conservative perspective concerning adult sexuality on the one hand, and the sexual liberation characterizing the U.S. in the 1960s and ‘70s on the other. The show’s compromise with the earlier standard seemed to be that all the non-married characters had at least to say they loved each other before hopping into the same bed. Coming from a society with an even narrower perspective on human sexuality than that of the TV audience, I could grasp this part of the humor even if I did not

fully understand its cultural context.

While I struggled to learn, I began to wonder whether people in the same culture could ever have all the information they needed to grasp the humor often present in their daily lives. The answer seems to be both yes and no. With my limited knowledge of American norms, I could find the nervous mannerisms of a White passenger trying to seduce an African-American passenger to be funny, without understanding the challenge that scene presented to the prevailing attitude about interracial couples. But the scene would have had a stronger impact had I understood the full context. This is the difference between slapstick and satire. Humor on *The Love Boat* coated criticisms of prevailing norms with laughter, and you could simply laugh at the slapstick coating or you could also appreciate the rather gentle underlying satire: either way you were entertained.

Although the sugar coating of slapstick is funny, jokes that tell the truth about something while joking seem more interesting. The essence of satire is an implied criticism of something that falls short of a standard the comedian wants to hold up to us. It was this that led me from *The Love Boat* to Lenny Bruce. As a part of



Dr. Jian Leng

editor's notes

Continued...

exploring the idea of humor and culture, my husband gave me a book containing Lenny Bruce's routines from the 1960s. His performance style is considered tame now but Lenny Bruce was, for me, a crash course in humor that I still have not entirely completed. Bruce's humor stripped away the sugar coating, leaving only satirical commentary on social, cultural, and political conventions. Bruce's use of strong language and extreme perspectives was designed to shock us into recognizing the dissonance between what we thought we believed and how we actually behaved.

This is the intention behind his routine that begins with the incendiary line: "By the way, are there any niggers here tonight?" Although I know many comedians use this expression today, when I saw that word, one that carried all the baggage of oppression, I wondered how it could be considered humorous. But Bruce went on in something like a jazz riff to say that he knew of one nigger that worked there, and that there were two niggers in the audience, and then he described other audience members by other racial epithets - "one mick, one spic, one hick, thick, funky, spunky boogey." Finally, like an auctioneer selling a roomful of items, Bruce rapid-fired a long series of racial epithets aimed at everyone.

Was it funny? Perhaps the tension between knowing those words are taboo and hearing someone use them in public is a kind of slapstick, but Bruce wanted more out of the humor than that. Bruce ended that portion of his routine by saying, "the word's suppression gives it the power, the violence, the viciousness." So he wanted to use the word until it had no meaning left.

Of course, as the reactions to Randall Kennedy's book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* demonstrated, the history of that word is not so simple. It is difficult to drain all the connotations of a word that still retains its power to wound. Perhaps humor cannot yet completely undermine that power by speaking truth, but it is very important to try, and to keep trying. Why? Because on one level people know that racism contradicts the values they claim to hold, but they often succumb to it anyway. Satirical humor reminds us of this tension by shocking us in a way that forces us to recognize the way we act. Because this shock is based on values

we share, it reminds rather than instructs. Martin Luther King, whose birthday we celebrate this month, uses the same kind of tension in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. When he tells us his dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of the phrase "all men are created equal," he highlights the fact that such equality has still not been attained. By describing his dream, he exposes the behavioral reality we must change as he reminds us of the standards we have set for ourselves.

It should not be surprising that King's "I Have a Dream" speech would eventually be riffed on. Nor, some forty years later, that such riffs would be Hip Hop rather than jazz. In her book, *Your Negro Tour Guide: Truths in Black and White*, Kathy Wilson renews the dream and adds a satirical riff to its power. Wilson's dream is that "the sons of former wage slaves and the sons of former owners of payday loan centers will one day cease using each other as a means to a dead end." Her dream is that one day her two nephews "will live in a city where they will not be profiled by the color of their skin, nor by the expensiveness of their cars or educations, but by the range of their respectability." That one day, in the neighborhoods infested with daylight drug deals, "little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with black mothers and black fathers and walk together as intact families." And "one day every guilty cop shall be prosecuted, every councilman and councilwoman shall be made accountable, and the homeless will be given shelter, and the crooked politicians will be made straight, and the needs of the unregistered voter shall be revealed, and the rest of us shall see it together." With this hope, we will "mow down out of the mountain of status quo a stone of progressiveness" and "strangle dissonance into four-part harmony." And, on that day, "all of God's children - B-boys and white boys, gays, lesbians, Jews, Gentiles, Protestants, Catholics, anti-Semites and non-believers - will be able to hook arms and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

Jian Leng
Associate Director
The Center for the Humanities



Events in January

All events are free unless indicated. Book events are free with book signings. All phone numbers include area code prefix unless indicated.

Tuesday, January 3

SLPL Book Discussion Group discusses *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, Machacek Branch, 1640 S. Lindbergh, Scanlan, 10am, 781-2948.

Thursday, January 5

Mystery Lovers' Book Club discusses *Jane and the Unpleasantness at the Three Manors* by Stephanie Barron, Headquarters, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 994-3300.

Book Journeys Discussion Group discusses *Charing Cross Road* by Hanif Kureishi, SLCL Indian Hills, 8400 D. Rd., 428-5424.

Trail Blazer Book Club discusses *Christmas Thief* by Mary Higgins Clark, SLCL Jamestown Bluffs, 4153 D. Rd., 2pm, 741-6800.

Tuesday, January 10

SLPL welcomes **Blake Travis** in conversation with community in diversity with rhythms and blues at the world village, Baden Branch, 8400 D. Rd., 10am, 388-2400.

SLCL Grand Glaize Book Discussion Group discusses *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi, 1010 Meramec St., 636-225-6454.

SLCL Headquarters Book Discussion Group discusses *The Kitchen* by Amy Tan, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 3300.

SLCL Sachs Branch Book Discussion Group discusses *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks, 16400 Burkhardt, 636-728-0001.

St. Louis Literary Calendar

Washington University professor **Lee Epstein** discusses her recent book *Advice and Consent: The Politics of Judicial Appointments*, SLCL Headquarters, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 7pm, 994-3300.

Evelyn Murphy discusses her book *Getting Even: Why Women Don't Get Paid Like Men and What to Do About It*, LBB, 399 N. Euclid, 7pm, 367-6731.

WU Foreign Literature Group discusses *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, by A. M. Smith, lower level of West Campus Bldg, 7425 Forsyth, 7:30pm, 727-6118.

Wednesday, January 11

Bookies Book Discussion Group discusses *Devil in the White City* by Eric Larson, SLCL Oak Bend, 842 S. Holmes, 2pm, 822-0051.

Boone's Bookies discusses *Open House* by Elizabeth Berg, SLCL Daniel Boone, 300 Clarkson, 2pm and 7pm, 636-227-9630.

Sisters in Crime welcomes **Christine Matthews** discussing "Murder and Mayhem in 3,000 Words or Less," SLCL Headquarters, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 6:45pm, 994-3300.

Eric Post discusses his book *Ghost Town: While St. Louis Sleeps*, LBB, 399 N. Euclid, 7pm, 367-6731.

The **3D Resource Book Center Book Club** discusses *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah, 3003 Arsenal, 7pm, 762-9742.

Thursday, January 12

SLCL Headquarters Book Discussion Group discusses *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan, 1640 S. Lindbergh, 2pm, 994-3300.

Murder of the Month Book Club discusses *Burnt Orange Sunrise* by David Handler, SLCL Indian Hills, 8400 Delpport, 3:30pm, 428-5424.

SLPL Schlafly Branch hosts **A Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, with song and stories, 225 N. Euclid, 7pm, 367-4120.

Contemporary Issues Book Discussion Group discusses *Why America Slept* by Gerald Posner, SLPL Carpenter, 3309 S. Grand, 7pm, 772-6586.

Authors@Your Library features **Jud Miner** reading from *Amos and the Wild Welshman*, SLPL Schlafly, 7pm, 367-4120.

University City Great Books Discussion Group discusses *Doomsday* and *The Tale of the Hands of God*, 6800 Washington, 8pm, 994-7914.

Friday, January 13

Great Expectations Book Discussion Group discusses *Liberating Paris* by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, SLCL Rock Road, 10267 St. Charles Rock, 10am, 429-5116.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author **Jared Diamond** discusses his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Ethical Society of St. Louis, 9001 Clayton, 7pm, 367-6731.

Saturday, January 14

Mystery Lovers' Book Club discusses *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, SLCL Carondelet, 6800 Michigan, 10am, 752-9224.

Write Along Writers' Workshop welcomes writers of all genres and levels to share and learn, SLCL Indian Hills, 8400 Delpport, 11:30am, 428-5424.

Authors@Your Library features **J. K. Dennis** discussing his book *Lessons to a Meaningful Life*, SLPL Schlafly, 2pm, 367-4120.

SLCL Mid-County Branch hosts a **Writer's Workshop** designed for amateur writers, 7821 Maryland, 2pm, 721-3008.

Sunday, January 15

Join a free **Poetry Workshop** sponsored by the St. Louis Poetry Center at University City Library with guest critic **Devin Johnston**, 6701 Delmar, 1:30pm, 770-9130.

Figure skater **Nikki Nichols** signs her book *Frozen in Time: The Enduring Legacy of the 1961 U.S. Figure Skating Team*, Borders, 11745 Olive, 2pm, 432-3575.

Tuesday, January 17

SLPL Book Discussion Group discusses *Blackberry Tea Club* by Barbara Herrick, Machacek Branch, 6424 Scanlan Ave, 10am, 781-2948.

SLPL Kingshighway Branch hosts a discussion of **Katherine Dunn's** *Geek Love*, 2260 S. Vandeventer, 6:45 pm, 771-5450.

¡Leamos! Spanish Book Discussion Group discusses *En el Tiempo de las Mariposas* by Julia Alvarez, SLPL Carpenter, 3309 S. Grand, 7pm, 772-6586.

Wednesday, January 18

SLCL Sachs Branch Book Discussion Group discusses *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, 16400 Burkhardt, 2pm, 636-728-0001.

Mary Doria Russell signs her novel *A Thread of Grace*, Borders, 1519 Brentwood, 7pm, 918-8189.

Oak Bend Evening Book Group discusses Tony Hillerman's *Fallen Man*, SLCL Oak Bend, 842 S. Holmes, 7:30pm, 822-0051.

Thursday, January 19

Barbara Taylor Bradford signs her book *Just Rewards*, Borders, 1519 S. Brentwood, 7pm, 918-8189.

Saturday, January 21

Bobbi Smith offers budding authors tips in how to target manuscripts, finding an agent, and approaching publishers, J.C. Penney Conference Ctr, UMSL, 10am, 516-5974.

The Adult Readers Group meets, SLPL Julia Davis, 4415 Natural Bridge, 12pm, 383-3021.

Barri Bumgarner signs her book *Slipping*, Borders, 15355 Manchester Rd, 1pm, 636-230-2992.

Bill Nunes signs his book *Illinois in the Roaring 1920's*, Borders, 6601 N. Illinois, 2pm, 618-397-6097.

Monday, January 23

Thornbirds Book Discussion Group discusses *Just One Look* by Harlan Coben, SLCL Thornhill, 12863 Willowick, 2pm, 878-7730.

Tuesday, January 24

SLCL Grand Glaize Book Discussion Group discusses *Girl With a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier, 1010 Meramec Station, 2pm, 636-225-6454.

Jan. 24 continues...