

Thorne Smith

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Jason Thorne Smith (March 27, 1892–June 21, 1934), was an American writer of humorous fantasy fiction.

Best known today for his creation of Topper, Smith's comic fantasy fiction (most of it involving sex, lots of drinking, and supernatural transformations, and aided by racy illustrations) sold millions of copies in the early 1930s. Smith drank as steadily as his characters; his appearance in James Thurber's *The Years With Ross* involves an unexplained week-long disappearance. Smith was born in Annapolis, Maryland the son of a Navy commodore, attended Dartmouth College, and after hungry years in Greenwich Village working part-time as an advertising agent, Smith achieved meteoric success with the publication of *Topper* in 1926. He died of a heart attack while

vacationing in Florida.

Works

- *Biltmore Oswald: The Diary of a Hapless Recruit* (1918) A series of comic stories written for the Naval Reservist journal *The Broadside* while Smith was in the Navy.
- *Out O' Luck: Biltmore Oswald Very Much at Sea* (1919)
- *Haunts and Bypaths* (1919) A book of poetry.
- *Topper* (1926). (Copyright renewed, 1953) This and its 1932 sequel, *Topper Takes a Trip* were probably Smith's most famous work, about a respectable banker called Cosmo Topper and his misadventures with a couple of ghosts, Marion and George Kerby. It was made into a film for MGM by Hal Roach in 1937 starring Roland Young; the cast included Cary Grant as George Kerby and Constance Bennett as Marion Kerby. Two sequels

followed: *Topper Takes a Trip* in 1939 and *Topper Returns* in 1941. The books were adapted into an American television series beginning in 1953, with Leo G. Carroll as Cosmo Topper, Robert Sterling and Anne Jeffreys as the ghosts. Seventy-eight episodes were made: the pilot episode and a few of the early episodes were written by Stephen Sondheim.

- *Dream's End* (1927) (Copyright renewed 1955) A serious novel that was not a success.
- *The Stray Lamb* (1929) Mild-mannered investment banker, cuckold, and dipsomaniac T. Lawrence Lamb gains perspective on the human condition during a series of mysterious transformations into various animal forms. Lamb, his daughter Hebe, her boyfriend Melville Long, and Hebe's friend Sandra Rush (a twentyish lingerie model who becomes Lamb's love interest) pursue many adventures, most of which fall well outside the perimeter of law and order. As in

many Thorne Smith novels, a courtroom scene involving the protagonists and an exasperated judge provides a climax to the characteristically tipsy action. This novel is included with *Turnabout* and *Rain in the Doorway* in *The Thorne Stone 3-Decker* (Sun Dial Press, 1933).

- *Did She Fall?* (1930) A mystery novel admired by Dashiell Hammett.
- *The Night Life of the Gods* (1931). Quirky inventor Hunter Hawk strikes gold when he invents a device that will enable him to turn living matter into stone and to reverse the process at will. After a chaotic field test he meets stunning 900 year old Megaera who teaches him to turn stone into flesh. The two and a bunch of friends set their sights on New York City to bring the Greek gods of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to life...
- *Turnabout* (1931) Thorne Smith pits two thoroughly modern married people in a classic battle of the sexes.

After listening to the nearly endless bickering and childish jealousy of a young man and wife (Tim and Sally Willows), an ancient Egyptian idol decides to play a trick on the two by causing them to switch bodies. After the wife impregnates her husband, things take a decided turn for the worse as they separately try to deal with the object of the former wife's affections — a deplorably predictable square jawed philanderer by the name of Carl Bently. The scene in which Tim, trapped in his wife's body, exacts an icy revenge on the unfortunate interloper is one of the unforgettable moments of Thorne Smith's peculiar humor. Both a film (1940) and a short lived 1979 television series (cancelled after six episodes) were based on *Turnabout*. [1] This novel is included with *The Stray Lamb* and *Rain in the Doorway* in *The Thorne Stone 3-Decker*.

- "Lazy Bear Lane" (1931) A children's book. [2]

- *The Bishop's Jaegers* (1932). Depressed and indifferent heir of a vast coffee import fortune, Peter Van Dyke finds his life and high society engagement turn upside down when his secretary, Josephine Duval determines that she will rescue him from his horrible fate by ruining him morally. After an amusing scandal involving a nude Peter Van Dyke, Miss Duval and an ill starred burglar in a coat closet, he finds himself cast adrift in a fog with a motley crew that includes a Bishop Waller of the Episcopal Church and a former nude model named Aspirin Liz. The enterprising party lands unceremoniously on the shores of one of New York's sauciest nudist colonies, and thus is the liberation of the coffee importer set in motion. One of Smith's only comic novels in which no element of the supernatural is featured.
- *Rain in the Doorway* (1933) Yet another cuckolded husband, Hector

Owen, inadvertently becomes a partner in a big-city department store. The bulk of the action involves the highly inebricated adventures of Owen, his three partners (Mr. Horace Larkin, a man called Dinner, and Major Barney Britt-Britt), and a salesgirl from the pornographic books department, Miss Honor "Satin" Knightly. Of the three novels included in *The Thorne Smith 3-Decker* (see *The Stray Lamb* and *Turnabout* above) this is the most openly erotic, with many direct suggestions of sexual encounters and cartoons of nude young women cavorting with the protagonists, drawn by artist Herbert Roesse. The Thorne Smith signature courtroom scene provides a climax, but the novel's biggest surprise isn't sprung until the final pages.

- *Skin and Bones* (1933) A photographer's freak accident in the dark room produces a chemical concoction causing him (and his dog) to randomly switch back and forth

between normal and X-ray (skeleton) versions of themselves. Predictably, much drinking and cavorting ensues, as he finds people able to see beyond his appearance and appreciate him for who he is, while inadvertently terrifying those who can not.

- *The Glorious Pool* (1934) Perhaps the best example of Thorne Smith's acutely sharp social humor played out against a backdrop of the Volstead Amendment (Prohibition). Two unrepentant old reprobates are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the seduction which made the stylish old man named Rex Pebble into an adulterer and his companion, Spray Summers into his hard boiled mistress. While their exasperating and highly alcoholic Japanese houseboy, Nokashima, plays ju jitsu with the English language, the two slip into a swimming pool whose waters have been changed into a fountain of youth. Abandoning their clothes and modesty with their advanced years, the

newfound youthfulness of their bodies puts into motion an evening of hijinks that only a seasoned and well practiced old couple of sinners could manage to imagine.

- *The Passionate Witch* (1941) (published posthumously and largely the work of Norman H. Matson), produced in 1942 as the movie *I Married A Witch*, one of the inspirations along with *Bell, Book and Candle* for the long-running TV series *Bewitched*. A sequel to the novel, *Bats In The Belfry* (1942), is entirely by Matson though sometimes attributed to Smith.

External links

- Thorne Smith biography
- Thorne Smith at the Internet Speculative Fiction Database
- Archive of Thorne Smith novels which are out of European copyright
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