

## Panel: Erma's Place in Popular American Humor April 1, 2000

Panelists: Jason Bunch, Karen Erickson, Penelope Fritzer, Melvin Helitzer, Shelia Hassell Hughes, Betty Youngkin.

The first question is: considering other important 20<sup>th</sup> century popular American humor writers, please place Erma Bombeck's work in perspective. How important was she, really, in context?

*SHH: First speaker to address this question is Melvin Helitzer who is a Professor of Journalism at Ohio University. He is a lecturer and author of four books, three of them on humor; "Comedy Writing Secrets" being his latest. And so, if you would address this question in some way of Erma's place or position in modern American humor?*

*MH: I have a feeling that the reason I was invited to this Erma Bombeck conference, and it has been a wonderful presentation; I call it a love fest. I never saw so much love in my life last night since the first night of my honeymoon. And the only reason I think I was invited was the Erma Bombeck went to Ohio University for one year and then transferred to Dayton and I think they are trying to shove my nose in it, and they should. I asked Bill Bombeck yesterday "why did Erma transfer?" And he said "well there were two reasons, one had to do with the family relationship and the second was that she didn't feel that anybody inspired her at our English department where she was studying. And she came to Dayton and some wonderful English professor here used those magical three words "you can write", and I am going to tell you that when I get back to Ohio University and talk to English professors who don't encourage and stimulate, I am going to kick some ass.*

*It's been said over and over again, Erma was a pioneer, she was a pioneer obviously of women's humor; not a subject in the nineteen-forties and the nineteen-fifties and everything else that was encouraged. And, yes, we had the Phyllis Dillers of the world who were doing standup and things like that and there were columnists who were writing, but suddenly she became a pioneer and a leader and lasted for a long, long time. I cannot imagine anybody with the ability to do three columns a week plus all the extras that she did: books, records, lectures and everything else. And someone said, "what's a professional humorist" and I said, someone who is consistent, all of us can be funny once or twice, but to be consistent over and over must have taken tremendous dedication and talent and cooperation of her family, what a sacrifice! The thing that I am most interested in is her technique. I teach humor at Ohio University, written a book on it, written several books on it and what we do is to analyze her humor. Someone once said "analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog, they both die in the process". That is true, but she was a master of technique. In my workshop yesterday I had a chance to go into that in a great deal of detail, I won't bore you with it, but no one in humor will ever, ever stop being grateful that we had an Erma Bombeck. My regret is that we lost her too soon. We will never know the wonderful things that could have come out and as I said she is the closest thing in humor to Mother Theresa.*

**SHH:** *Thank you. Our second panelist is Dr. Betty Youngkin, Associate Professor in our English department and Director of the Women Studies Program here at the University of Dayton and a colleague of mine, and I am very pleased to be here on the panel. So, Betty how would you address this question? You have spoken a little bit about Erma's place in the Women's Studies curriculum. How would you place her work within the context of popular American Humor?*

**BY:** *My interest in Erma Bombeck began actually down at the Centerville Library, Washington Township. They have asked me come every year and be a final Judge for them in terms of the essays that are entered in their Erma Bombeck contest. I think about her work every year. And I really place her work in a much larger, longer tradition, older than America even. The place I put it is the place where a writer named Phillip Lopate put it. He is a Adams Professor of English at Hofstra University, he is writer for the "Paris Review" and other publications. In 1994 he collected the essays of fifty writers throughout history, he called it "The Art of the Essay: The Best of 1999" (ISBN 0385484151). And as I read his informative and scintillating introduction nine characteristics of the personal essay emerge; I promise I am not going to tell you all nine, but if anybody wants the list you certainly can have it. Since the personal essay comes from this long tradition marked especially by the time of Michel De Montaigne who used the word, the French word "essai" which actually means "attempts" or "trials" to describe this genre. We who are interested in Bombeck's work can find a place for her in this historical tradition as well. Now it is interesting in Lopate's book that the only humorists he includes are James Thurber and Max Beerbohm, but I think that as we think of Erma's works it fits here.*

*Just three of these characteristics might be helpful to you. He said that a hallmark of the personal essay is it's intimacy, the writer seems to speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom. Through sharing thoughts, memories, desires, complaints and whimsies the personal essayist sets up a relationship with the reader, a dialog of friendship if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness and companionship. Is this not a true description of Erma Bombeck's style, confiding everything, no holds barred! Showing the average housewife and making them unaverage [sic] with absolute assurance that the whole world wants to know these complaints. And finally, establishing a lifetime of friendship with all kinds of people. The body of her work exudes these qualities. A second of Lopate's characteristics reads "the personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator, we must trust his or her core of sincerity. We must also feel secure that the essayist has done a fair amount of introspective homework already, is grounded in reality and is trying to give us the maximum understanding and intelligence of which he or she is capable." A dunderhead and a psychotic killer maybe sincere, but that would not sufficiently recommend them for the genre. No doubt Erma Bombeck would appreciate Lopate's use of humor here since she was the humorist extraordinaire. Yet she was a sincere humorist. Anyone who reads, and I mentioned this essay before "a Mother's Eye", I mean "a Mother's Look" from 1968 in which she describes the five looks that mother's cast on misbehaving children; "the look of death", "the deadpan glare", "the martyr's countenance" that's my very favorite one, "the desperate squint" and the "divine guidance stare". And then there*

was last one “the no look, look” which is the worst of all. And all the subtle distinctions among them shows that Bombeck as a writer and Bombeck as this creator of the “mother persona” is indeed grounded in reality, has done her share of introspection and gives the reader always intelligence and maximum understanding. The last of the characteristics I will point to is this one, which I think is really key and somebody mentioned earlier. The rise of the English personal essay in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was directly connected to the growth of newspapers and magazines, which provided the essayist with an audience and a limited income; thank goodness! The influence of periodicals on the genre had mixed results, as it continues to do so. The need to say everything in a limited space for a general audience reined in the form, but the periodicals also helped shape, sharpen and relax the form. The fact that Erma Bombeck found her niche in a suburban newspaper, moved on to a city paper and was syndicated in over seven hundred papers around the U.S. places her in the center of this genre.

When I ask students to read Bombeck and write a four-hundred to four-hundred and fifty word essay they marvel at how difficult task it is to hone one’s prose into this form in which the writer must follow one specific topic through a logical organization, use words an ordinary reader of a newspaper would understand, and at the same time achieve a level of unity and coherence. I did not require that they write humor as Bombeck did although some of them tried. I submitted all of the essays to the contest and the scrutiny of the preliminary judges, all twenty-eight of them. None of them, none of my students made the final round, a fact that disgruntled some of them, but made them keenly aware that this genre is not easy nor effortless despite its appearance of being so. One last comment, if we view Bombeck’s work in the larger tradition of the personal essay we place it certainly among the best of newspaper human-interest columns in the company of Mike Royko, Russell Baker, Art Buchwald and other columnists who taught their craft in their writing workshops yesterday, on Friday. At the same time Erma Bombeck’s work also rests among the personal essayists like Joan Didion, James Thurber, E.B. White, Scott Sanders and Mary McCarthy who have in our culture become what J.B. Priestley called “snapper-up of uncensored trifles” glimpsed the significance of such trifles so that, for a second we see them surprisingly against the background of the eternities. What writer in any genre could ask for more?

SHH: Our third panelist is Penelope Fritzer who graced us with her presentation on Erma Bombeck this morning. Professor Fritzer is from Florida Atlantic University. Can you tell us how you would address this issue of Erma’s within the history that you so elegantly sketched for us? You have done a little bit that already.

PF: It looks like the question, the real basic question is: was her work important? My answer is that it was very important. She was a major force in establishing a new genre in most people consciousness. I mentioned earlier that fact that her several times weekly syndication so accessible, much more than many other writers who had published only in book form. In addition, to her intrinsic importance as a writer of pleasing humor, the women’s movement made the housewife both dated and historically important so Bombeck, as her chronicler, is a valuable witness to a time period, to popular feeling

*and a large part of the population and a major cultural harbinger of her time. Bombeck is certainly the most significant of the coterie of women writing as housewife humorists in the twentieth century. At a unique time in American history, economic and social elements came together to form an unusual and an isolated class: the suburban housewife. Although they appeared earlier and lasted later than just this period, these women flourished with the expansion and development of the suburbs after World War II and began to fade in their purest form with the growing influence of the nascent feminist movement of the sixties and seventies. Erma Bombeck, the housewife's most famous chronicler moved from mother to media sensation over the years so that by the time of her death she was writing about an historical moment and about a way of life to which she was no longer connected.*

*Bombeck pushed housewife humor onto the national scene in part because her syndication provided ongoing reminders and reinforcement of the humor in the trials and tribulations of domestic life. Bombeck proved to be in her own writings to be just as influential on the feminist movement as Friedan had in **The Feminist Mystique**. Bombeck's work rose almost in sync with the rise of the feminist movement, in part because it reflected women's dissatisfaction with their domestic roles, in part because of the sheer hilariousness of her writing. Also in part because of the large number of baby boomers growing up in the 1960s, overwhelming their parents with generational conflict in areas such as hair length and finding themselves. Bombeck's work reflected parent's puzzlement with the generation they had raised, it reassured them that they were not alone, and let them see the humor in areas that may have been very stressful with the family. In that sense, Bombeck acted as mediator and peacemaker for many families, and that role may explain some of their abiding affection for her and for her work: they came through the flames together.*

*And yet Bombeck inspired and experienced no anger, no wrath, no accusations of trying to destroy the American Family. The reason was her humor: she poked fun at herself and her neighbors in a way that was very unthreatening to both men and to other women.*

*Another element we should not overlook is the "feel good" quality of her work. It was guaranteed to make most readers, even if they came to her work not particularly disposed to it, laugh aloud. Interestingly, her work never really translated to other media: the television program was a failure, and she never evolved on television beyond being a guest on talk shows. One reason maybe that the nature of a book is kind to material like Bombeck's: pace and delivery are up to the reader and to his or her imagination, the books are much more interesting than any aural presentation would be, because they move as quickly as the reader desires, leaving no time for boredom, and, because her jokes are spread thickly, and again, touch many aspects of the reader's life, the sheer element of enjoyment, as in reading Mark Twain cannot be discounted.*

*By working within the system (even as she supported the Equal Rights Amendment), by remaining a housewife while complaining loudly and humorlessly, she slowly chiseled away at fixed ideas about women's roles. Her classic riffs on obsessive neighbors who*

wax the driveway or polish the garbage cans resonated with commonsensical women who were running their households but who were not buying into ironing sheets on top of all their other chores and later a right for them to question and modify the roles they had been assigned.

*In fact, Bombeck's writing undoubtedly affected greater number of women did that of most feminists, particularly those women who were not ready to renounce husband, motherhood and housekeeping, but who were at the same time aware that the "happy housewife" situation was not quite the Nirvana that had been sold so relentlessly through the fifties. Much humor depends on a foundation of criticism and derision of the subject it is aimed at: In housewife humor this derision is frequently directed inward at the writer, but even more at the role. Guilt at failing to live up to the expected ideal of efficiency, wifeliness and ideal motherhood pervades many of the women's humorous writing- especially Bombeck's.*

*A final element of the importance of her work is that it gives voice to a particularly voiceless group. As interesting and significant to the genre as those who came before her, none of them penetrated the national consciousness the way that she did. I had mentioned earlier that those typical writers in her genre; Jean Kerr, Betty MacDonald in particular, whose books were best sellers before Bombeck were also partly best sellers because they were writing about exotic situations (in one case life on a chicken farm in the pacific northwest and in an another in New York theatrical circles), so that the housewifely element was not nearly as central to them as it was to Bombeck's work, particularly her earlier writing. To identify with her work one had only to be, or be interested in, a housewife: there was no alternative interest or point of view in it. The universality of that situation spoke to millions.*

*Interestingly, after Bombeck had mined thoroughly that domestic situation for humor (and, perhaps not coincidentally, when her children were grown and she had achieved fame and fortune and was no longer strictly a housewife). She continued her writing with expanded interests in such books, for example, as When You Look Like Your Passport Photo, It's Time to Go Home. But by then, her reputation was made and she had changed twentieth-century humor. Thank you.*

SHH: *Our fourth panelist is Jason Bunch, Master's candidate in the English Department here at the University of Dayton. Jason, can you offer us some perspective on Erma's place.*

JB: *I can try. One of my professors always told me "literature is life". When I try to look at literature and its importance, I try to look at it in how it effects not only my life, but how it effects life in general, as you all heard, and I won't bore you with repeating it. Bombeck's work really did talk about life. As Professor Fritzer was saying; all one had to do to really identify with her work is to interested in, or be a housewife. Her work is very important because it does appeal to the common person. One thing I will say is; recently the University of Dayton has gotten Bombeck's papers and when you start to look at an author's importance and their influence and significance on literature, looking*

*at their papers and seeing how their work holds up not only through the life of the author, but the life of the work. Now that Bombeck's papers are visible to the public and scholars can have a chance to go over them to see how her work really evolved. I think in the future we will truly be able to answer how important her work is a context not only scholarly, but in how it effected people.*

*SHH: Thank you. A final panelist to address this question of Erma's Place is one who has spoken eloquently about the way Erma has spoken to you as a scholar and parent. To address the issue of her place within American humor is Karen Erickson from St. John's University.*

*KE: Thank you. My remarks will touch on three points that I think help explain the enormous popularity of Erma Bombeck's writing and the lasting quality of her humorous writing. Erma Bombeck's work appeared in a variety of settings. Such a wide variety of settings in newsprint, paperback, she made many television appearances. I think that this variety of settings meant that her work had a kind of democratic access. Just about everybody could come in contact with the way that she phrased her writing, the way that she looked at the world, the kinds of issues that she raised for largely no cost or for very low cost. It also means the newspaper writing in particular, the fact that she wrote in such a way that people for week after week came in contact with her voice meant that she entered into kind of a daily rhythm. Because of her television appearances I found that as a reader I was reading her as though she were physically narrating. I don't know if that happened to anyone else, but her vocal qualities of warmth and brilliance affected the way I read her work. There was something very oral about it. It was partly from the first person narrator and from this persona, which she developed so beautifully, but also from that simple historical fact that she spoke in public. In this I might compare her to a very different humorist – Garrison Keillor. Garrison Keillor who also provides humor in variety of media including those in which we hear him speak, we hear his voice. I also think that the regularity of her writing meant that many people felt intimate with her ideas, and they would ask for columns to be reprinted. I have received several of these columns over the Internet. I suspect this is a violation of copyright law, but I think a lot of people feel very free to send her work to their friends, to clip it out and to use it as a gesture, as an expression of something that they would like to say. Though new readers won't have the privilege of hearing her speak on a regular basis, I believe that her writing still retains this very present narrative style that is very direct and engaging. Second, in addition to this variety of settings or formats or venue we also have an enormous variety of topics mingled together in a kind of quilt-like fashion, but always with the always with reliance on, well not always, but often with the reliance of a profound concern. In "Fear of Buying" for example she describes a frenzied supermarket-shopping trip, which includes the search for continuing volumes of the encyclopedia, which is becoming increasingly difficult as people drop their subscriptions and the supermarkets don't order as many copies. She comes home one day without a copy of the volume "S" and her husband in the piece is not understanding as to why she is do dismayed about this. She says "Do you want your kids to go through life not knowing the meaning of sex, the Sabbath, satire, scruples, sin and status, not to mention to mention, sales?" She could keep all of this in the air at the same time. Sex and sin we*

*might think of as easy laughs, status and satire, more sophisticated laugh, but also Sabbath and scruples which are very old-fashioned foundations for cultural institutions and ends with the true American twist-“sales”. So a purely random collection of “s” words offers an example of her ability to put things together side by side that have absolutely nothing to do with each other ordinarily, and come from different levels and come from different levels of discourse in a kind of an insightful, shocking, humorous way. In this way she gently removed certain expressions that might have been considered passé by the U.S. intelligentsia.*

*In many of her columns and chapters there is little passage, a line, a word of something that I would consider a homiletic passage, trying to suggest that we should think about something in another light. There are some articles that are entirely like that; like “Heroes” or “The Volunteer” or “Mothers Who have Lost a Child”. It is more frequently the case that there is simply one line or a paragraph slipped into something where there is bit more serious theme. In her piece “I Want Your Job Vanna” we see a series of comic visions of alternatives to the work of “mother” and “housewife” including the Statue of Liberty. She says, “I want to the job of the Statue of Liberty!” Within this piece she has one line where she confesses, “as a mother, I talked too much, I had good material, but used it indiscriminately”. The homily is merely suggested and then her later tone returns. The variety of topic and the brevity of her treatment combine with deep a commitment to relationship and a rhetorical urging to change our behavior. This results in an approachable and very influential body of writing. Now, earlier this week while driving my children home from school we passed a park that they loved to play at, and they begged; “can we stop, can we please!” and I said “no” because I hadn’t worked out my transition between point one and two here and into part 3. I am coming to the Bombeck Conference, I have to be ready, and the family will be there. I am waiting at the red light which is going into it’s “rush-hour eternity” and I thought of Erma Bombeck’s article “If I had my Life to Live over”. Well, what are you going to do? I put on the blinker and we stopped at the park and that’s the transition you get.*

*My last point is that Bombeck’s writing will endure because there was something in it that wasn’t “used up” by the immediate context. Frank Kermode calls this narrative “disponibilite” a French word that he uses, a kind of availability or predisposition towards something. There is something left over. He suggest that in gospel of Mark the figure of Judah, who is such a minor figure in the gospel, goes on to this really remarkable medieval and renaissance tradition of poems, stories, legends and stained glass windows. It is really remarkable what happens to Judah after the end of gospel. I do think that Judah and mothers have a certain connection as carriers of social guilt, but also this kind of endless narrative development allowed the housewife figure that Erma Bombeck authored to go beyond the house and become relevant to many other speakers. Speakers who had been constrained by our society, people who were now encouraged to let go of themselves. In this way I think Erma Bombeck authored a critique of women’s roles and a celebration of the home, and gave a way to view any role which constraints people, which keeps them from their best self. In this she still remains disponible, available to us all. Thank you.*

SHH: *We will have some time for an open question period towards the end of our discussion this afternoon, but first we have set aside some time for the panelists to engage with each other. I have a few questions in mind, but before I jump into those I would give you an opportunity to respond if there was something that a member of the panel said that prompts some thought.*

MH: *We keep talking about Erma being a leader, and she was because she opened the door for not just women in humor; among my students, sixty to seventy percent are women, but for many people to get into humor to find an outlet for their emotions. I have been teaching humor for about twenty years and have had maybe four or five hundred students over that time. The proudest one, or the one that I am the most proud of is a blind man by the name of Troy Hammond from Columbus. Troy was a student in Advertising and Public Relations and wasn't making it because they were dealing with visual things in advertising. I think one of the important points is, and I know there are a lot of teachers in this room, is not to grade, but to find their talent and encourage it. I said to Troy "what would you like to be" and he said, "I would like to be a standup comic". I said, "I've never seen a blind standup comic". I have since, by the way. I said "Troy if you are willing to work at this craft sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year we will do everything we can to help you". Today, despite that terrible, terrible disease, he is making a living as a standup comic playing clubs and doing television and things around the country. **Rolling Stone** gave him a six-page article. He sees life as we cannot and makes fun of it in the Erma Bombeck style. He talks about going into a pottery store with his cane waving back and forth. The clerk says, "what the hell are you doing" he says, "just looking". One day he was crossing campus with a Seeing Eye dog and I wanted to see how that wonderful animal was going to get him around campus. There was a street with a light, the light turned green and the dog lifted his leg and urinated all over Troy's trousers. As I watched, he bent down and he patted the dog on the head, took a biscuit out and gave it to him. I said "Troy that is the kindest act I have ever seen anybody do". He said; "kind hell, I just wanted to find out where his head is so that so that I can kick him in the ass." That is not an Erma Bombeck story.*

*Erma Bombeck is used in our school, to spite the Dayton relationship, as an example of what you can be: you can be a housewife. A lot of people say "where do you get your ideas", the answer is: everywhere. They just have to be ideas that other people care about. You want to write about your cat, forget about: I don't care about your cat! You want to write about children, I'm interested! You want to write about grandchildren, I'm even more interested! What you are writing about is not just self-aggrandizement; it is commercially aimed at a market that is also interested in your subject matter. That is frequently the biggest mistake humorists make is not knowing that the king of comedy is an audience, and not yourself.*

BY: *I wanted to ask Jason, now that we have the Bombeck papers in the University of Dayton Library, as a graduate student what possibilities do you see there for research and work: who might come and look at those papers?*

JB: *With conferences like this there is certainly going to be a lot of attention paid to Bombeck and her work. To continue with what Karen Erickson was saying: Bombeck's availability increases with her papers. Students and scholars who want to study a particular style, they can see how her work evolved. What she started with and what she finished with. I'm a Teaching Assistant in the English department teaching first year composition. What we stress is rewriting and thinking about what you are writing and about your audience. This is what I try to express to my students. We have already said that Bombeck was so accessible to people with this persona she built that they thought when they read her work that this was she. She was more of a writer than a housewife yet through her work people saw the persona that she was at home being a housewife.*

*What I am interested in her papers specifically is the evolution of her as a writer. We all know about her life, exaggerated through her work and about her experiences as a housewife, but I don't think a lot of people really know what her experiences as a writer are. Possibly she may have been up all hours of the night revising and drafting, worrying about her audience and if they are really going to understand what she is trying to express to them. Is she going to offend someone or will she capture someone's imagination so that they really understand what she is saying. Looking at her papers and being able to study them you do see not only how her writing evolved, you learn more about her as a writer and what she put into her work.*

*To deal with the first question posed about putting her work in a larger context, I said earlier that a professor of mine said, "Literature is life". If you really want to know about Bombeck as a writer you want to know about the life of her work. If you want to place her in a literary history you have to think about how she really affected history. One of the ways to do this is to see what she as a person contributed to her writing to find out how her writing contributes to others. I hope that answers the question.*

SHH: *Jason, one of the things that your comments highlight is that there is a certain tension in the roles that Bombeck played and the perceptions of those roles that her persona is a woman who leaves the home with a car full of children, and yet her profession is that of a writer. I wondered if any of the other panelists expand on that in terms of Erma's legacy and how she is perceived. Is there a danger of reducing Erma Bombeck to, as someone put it this morning, "a housewife who happened to be a writer" rather than a writer who crafts this persona of the housewife.*

KE: *I don't see this happening because there were so many books on different topics that were so wildly popular. So many people identified with her who were not housewives or who identified with her as teenagers or people who were struggling with something. It would be a mistake by the academy if professors end up putting her in an anthology as a "housewife humorist", that would be a shame. If you think of her hysterical writing on travel or the self-help book craze of the Seventies and Eighties, there is just so much there that is pertinent to the study of the culture. I happen to concentrate more on the motherhood side because you have to concentrate on something, but there were many, many other things that could have been written about.*

BY: *It is also important to remember the history and chronology. Bombeck was a housewife, in the sense of the mother of young children for roughly twenty years. She had quite a life on either side of that. Many things that she brings to her writings come from other portions of her life. I think as Karen said that it is important to see the works that go beyond the housewife works. What a lot of people don't realize is the earlier works are the housewife works, the later books are really based on her past as well as current events that have past beyond her years as a housewife. A perfect example is the self-help books.*

SHH: *Erma said that she was inspired by the writings of Robert Benchley who found humor in the mundane, the everyday occurrence or observation. And Betty Youngkin you made the observation about the snapping up of those kinds of details. Do you see the mundane a kernel in important humor today? Are there writers, columnists or stand-up comics in the Erma Bombeck tradition of the mundane?*

BY: *I have been looking for some pieces and some stand-up comedy that have something to do with the way humor and comedy, and I noticed in the a book like Russell Baker's, I think it's 1993, that Russell Baker did a collection of essays from humorists in American Humor starting essentially with Mark Twain and moving to the present (Russell Baker's Book of American Humor). Baker still includes Erma Bombeck, but then, I can't give you the title of it but there was a large kind of paperback book that someone, maybe Matt Greuning has collected great 20th Century humorists and Erma is not included in that particular book. Maybe that book was intended to highlight more recent people who had written humor, but I think it is interesting and it points out the fact that if we look back at the 19th Century now from the point of view of who stays in the canon and who does not stay in the canon; writers come and go very quickly. We hear names and we have no memory of them; they are not taught in survey courses. I think it depends on who is doing the anthology, but there is always that element when we are talking about writing that we have to recognize. Part of our task is to keep reminding ourselves as Penelope said that Bombeck has a particular place in the literary canon of American humor.*

PF: *I would like to say a word about that as well. I think that now more than ever mundane elements provide the basis for humor; the classic example is Jerry Sienfeld and the situational comedy. Interestingly enough Andy Rooney is someone else who has been doing that for a number of years. Sienfeld gives to the phrase "did you ever notice", but Andy Rooney has for over twenty years done a very similar kind of essay. The reason I think there is a tremendous strength here is that these everyday events are what brings us together in spite of our diversity as a nation in gender, background and politics. All of these elements of the mundane provide a human connection. Because of that the kind of humorist who mine that humor are not going to go away. I don't see Erma ever being out of the canon because she is simply the best of the genre of the humor that she writes.*

JB: *To add to what Professor Helitzer said that the kings of comedy are the audience. When it comes to the mundane appealing to an audience you want to touch on the*

*simplest aspects of everyday life. Most people go through life and they do foolish things or they have a situation where they have to sit and laugh at themselves even if it just for five minutes and then they go on. When you are looking at a humorist and what a humorist's work means to an audience and how it affects that audience you get a sense of what that humorist is trying accomplish.*

*MH: This may sound very self-serving, but I think she is going to be an inspiration to many professors of many schools and colleges that it is O.K. to teach humor. How many here went to any university that had a course in humor writing? I don't see one hand go up, and I assume that you are all literate. Why not! We teach advertising copy writing, speech writing, technical writing etc. Humor is the most powerful means of communication we have today is not being taught at very many universities. With Erma Bombeck as a symbol, taking it out of the Henny Youngman, Milton Berle class of humor. As I walked through the campus here at Dayton and saw all the statues of the saints and was going to an Erma Bombeck conference; I said "she will be up there one day". Why not teach humor! I challenge every English professor, Journalism professor and believe it or not even Mathematics has a certain humor or cadence to it. I can tell you from my own experience that it is one of the most popular classes at Ohio University. The first time we gave it a few people registered; by the third time there was a one-year waiting list to get in. They are hungry for it; with Erma Bombeck's material it is a lot easier to use her as an example of the right way to do it. If anything comes out of this conference One of the things I hope is not only our admiration for her, but that she has given us indirectly the encouragement to take our skills, interests and everything else and translate it for the students on our campuses. I hope that's true.*

*KE: If you are taking very small things that everyone recognizes like "Seinfeld" or "Vanna" at some point some of you may not even know who "Vanna" is and soon more people won't know who "Vanna" is and what that means. There is a rift in centering your work on the mundane, but there is paradoxically that great openness as long as the work is well enough written that the exact connection isn't necessary to understand what is going on, but there is something in the overall piece helps us understand. This will last and I think today a lot of writers and cartoonists are using mundane material which leads me to wonder if there is not more of the mundane now days than there was before in the heavily materialistic society.*

*SHH: One of the questions that was coming to my mind earlier has to some degree been answered, but I thought I would put it out there in case anyone else wanted to respond to it is; the way in which Erma might become an object of study in a women's studies program, literature program, or a communications program. Certainly cultural studies as a field within the academy has been concerned in some way to sort of undermine the questions of aesthetic merit as ascertaining what is a fit object of study. That is it perfectly appropriate to study something as a cultural phenomena, icon, or product without debating that this document has high literary, with a capital L, merit. It seems to me that from the discussions that we had over the last couple of days that Erma Bombeck was an interesting example of who is both a kind of icon and phenomena, and*

as some of you have been arguing, aesthetic master of her craft. She might deserve study and attention for both of those reasons. Does that seem fair?

PF: *I think Karen really addressed that earlier when she talked the various elements of Bombeck's writing. I think it is really true in part because she is recent and they say it takes twenty years to develop any objectivity, in part because she wrote in a time of tremendous cultural change in America. I think because of those reasons we do tend to look at her more from a cultural studies and popular kind of view than we do from the literary merit point of view. Certainly not everything that Bombeck wrote is right up there with Shakespeare. On the other hand, we might want to say that there is a lot of literary merit there particularly in the timing, pacing and point of view. Some of the things that Karen was addressing earlier were the parts that speak to people, the homily that constantly reappears. I think that that will come with time once we have gotten past the sort of wonder of a look at where she was. We look at her genre and what she contributed to literature and to the women movement. Those things will come, but it is too early now. I think that is why you are seeing a certain lack of that kind of analysis at this point.*

MH: *I would sure like to hear from the audience some of the questions that they have.*

SHH: *We have fifteen minutes or so we can open it up.*

Question from the floor is: *have women gotten away from wanting to be like Erma Bombeck to wanting to be like Martha Stewart?*

BY: *Can I respond to that. A colleague just past along to me the seventy-fifth edition of the New Yorker that is a double issue in February. There is a fascinating essay by Joan Didion on Martha Stewart. I will let you read Didion because she really uncovers all the complexities of Martha Stewart. What I think is so interesting in that article is that Didion talks about academic efforts to understand to understand the Martha Stewart phenomena and it is interesting that a month later we are having this academic exploration of Erma Bombeck. I would refer all of you to that article because it is much more complex than I ever dreamed. When I bought my towels at K-Mart and they had Martha Stewart's name on them, I just bought them because they were towels. The price was right. I had thought about that also how we have moved to this Martha Stewart thing, but what Martha Stewart has in terms of what women admire is that she has her own name, her own product and she is worth more than a billion dollars. In terms of the great American dream, who can argue with that.*

From the audience: *"but she doesn't have a husband".*

BY: *I think she was driven by the fact that her husband walked out on her. We know about her husband, as least Joan Didion does. He left her for a twenty-one year old.*

From the audience: *Who wants to be Martha Stewart?*

Question from the Audience: *What kind of a label is put on Erma and how did she differ from the average “funny mother”.*

BY: *You make a good point because Bro. Ray Fitz, the president of our university, who knew her for many, many years when she served on the Board of Trustees said that she was always funny. They would be in a Board meeting and she was funny. People in Centerville who have talked to me about seeing her in the grocery store would say, “when I saw her in the grocery store, she was funny”. The humorist knack that she had was always present with her.*

PF: *I would like to add that in her work she is daughter some of the time, baby, sister, teenager sometime putting in italics what she is imagining what they would be thinking, sort of switching the roles. I have mixed feeling about trying to place her work academically. Part of the reason I was so delighted to be part of this conference was the scholarly part was on April Fools day, and I think that is a wonderful setting for whatever we might say.*

MH: *I just want to add one thing one thing about this “labeling”, and I agree with it that we use labels much too frequently is that everybody here in this room can be funny. Erma has shown that women can be funny, and I have to tell you as someone who is older than most people in this room that it was difficult for women to be funny years ago, it wasn't encouraged. Now every wife can be funny, my wife is hilarious. I just want to finish this, she is very beautiful and I love her very much, we have different religions so that we have a fundamental problem, she refuses to believe that I am God.*

PF: *The point of the question was to question the tendency to reduce or trivialize.*

Question from the audience: *How do you think Erma Bombeck influenced the American male?*

MH: *I don't quite understand, are you challenging men?*

KE: *Interestingly enough men of a slightly younger than Erma's, this is not to say that men her age don't identify, but given that the household roles were more delineated in those days, younger men are really identifying with Erma. I have been surprised, but my brother who is retired and a stay-at-home father he is Erma's biggest fan these days. I am finding that more and more, but I can't really speak to the situation at the time she was writing, but I do think that the importance her putting it on the public stage, making people aware of the housewife role cannot be stressed too much.*

*I wanted say to follow up to this young lady over here that one of the questions the panel had been given ahead of time was could Erma have written so effectively if she had not been “one of the people”? My response to that was that it really didn't matter what Erma was or what milieu she found herself in, she would have always been very amusing, her sense of humor would have just gone in a different direction. I think that the point you are making is a very good one.*

*BY: Our first child was born in 1970 and it was in the middle of this period that Erma Bombeck was writing about, and my husband's response to whole experience of having children was helped by the fact that our children were born at that particular time. I don't remember that Bill and I ever sat down and read Bombeck together, but we were certainly aware of her. More importantly, it was a time of real change for men too who had felt cut out of the experience with children. My husband wanted to be a part of that, and we were fortunate to be one of those Lamaze pioneering couples in Chicago when hospitals still wanted to shut fathers out. When we look at the whole birthing experience now we see that the father is fully involved and I think that is a real benefit to our society.*

*JB: I just know that I am twenty-two and I connect with Erma.*

*SHH: We have time for one more question.*

*Question from audience: Do you see anyone coming up to replace Erma Bombeck, what will we do without her?*

*JB: I don't think you will find anyone that writes like her, I think that is why we are all here and she touched as many people as she did. Certainly there is a need for humor in general whether it is from men or women. She did leave a void there, but I don't think that void will ever be filled. In the future there will be other women humorists who emerge and who are as successful if not more successful because of her. Her place in journalistic and literary history; that place will never be filled. Shakespeare's place will never be filled or any other great writer there will just be other writers who emerge because of their greatness.*

*PF: There are women humorists, funny women today going into newspaper column writing or doing stand-up comedy. The media of the future that might represent a kind of transformation of what Erma did.*

*MH: There are more markets begging for professional humor writers today than ever before in history. Advertising, speech writing, you cannot run for political office today without having a gag writer on your speech writing team. That troubles me when I when I think that the possibilities are Gore and Bush, two people who cannot tell a joke. I am not sure that Gore is running for President or for Mount Rushmore. Bush's knowledge of foreign affairs is that he went three times to the International House of Pancakes. They need gag writers on their side. In Literature, television, films and stand-up comedy, the list goes on and on, we cannot think of a place where humor is not necessary, including Education. You see, it is not what is taught at a university, it is what's caught. If we can get our students mouths open for laughter maybe we can put in a little food for thought.*

*The answer to your question is: she was a pioneer there are many, many opportunities for people including those in this room to not just take her place, but pick up the torch. There are many, many places to go. So, when people say we will not see her like again,*

*that is true, we had one President of the United States, the first one; God knows what we have come to now.*

*SHH: I was going to say that we are out of time and with those words of inspiration, but we have moved past the inspiration. We are out of time for this official discussion, but I thank you, a big thank you to all of our panelists and to all of you for participating in our discussion*