

The Humorous Times

Newsletter of the International Society for Humor Studies

Winter 2015

Volume 28, Issue 1

Association News

27th International Society for Humor Studies Conference

Oakland, California, USA, June 29 to July 3, 2015



The 27th Conference of the International Society for Humor Studies will be held from June 29 to July 3, 2015, at Holy Names University, overlooking the San Francisco Bay, in Oakland, California. Conference activities will begin on the morning of Monday, June 29, with a pre-conference workshop on the history, research, and applications of comedic improvisation led by Bay Area Theater Sports (BATS). The Conference will open officially in the afternoon with a Conference welcome followed by a plenary session on Judiciary Humor. The first day will continue with a roundtable on humor in animation art with artists from Pixar Animation Studios and the San Francisco Cartoon Museum. Tuesday, June 30 to Friday, July 3 will be full conference days with plenary addresses, symposia, workshops, and paper sessions. Plenary sessions and speakers will include:

Judiciary Humor (June 29)

Carol Corrigan (Associate Justice, California Supreme Court)
Christie Davies (University of Reading)
Marc Galanter (University of Wisconsin Law School)
Pamela Hobbs (Lawyer/Linguist)

Humor and Well-Being (June 30)

Willibald Ruch (University of Zurich)
Paul McGhee (The Laughter Remedy)
George Vaillant (Harvard Medical School)

Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Women in Stand-Up Comedy (July 1)

Sharon Lockyer (Brunel University)
Regina Barreca (University of Connecticut)
Kimie Oshima (Kanagawa University)

Mark Twain in the West (July 2)

John Bird (Winthrop University)
Victor Fischer (University of California at Berkeley)
Linda Morris (University of California at Davis)

Cognitive Science and Humor Studies (July 3)

Seana Coulson (University of California at San Diego)
Tony Veale (University College Dublin)
Graeme Ritchie (University of Aberdeen)

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Next Issue

The next *The Humorous Times* is due May 2015. Please send news items and announcements to ishs@hnu.edu.

For the 2015 ISHS Conference, 12 humor studies associations have also been invited to host the following general sessions and invited symposia:

American Humor Studies Association

Revisionist Strategies for the Study of 19th Century American Humor

Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor

The Myths and Realities of Applied and Therapeutic Humor and Laughter

Australasian Humour Studies Network

Australasian Humour Research

Center for Comedy Studies Research

Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Women in Stand-Up Comedy

CORHUM

The World of French Humour Studies

European Journal of Humour Research

Humour in Communication Styles

International Society for Luso-Hispanic Humor Studies

Humor in the Hispanic World between Poverty and Wealth

Israeli Society for Humor Studies

Israeli and Jewish Humor

Japanese Society for Laughter & Humor Studies

Catastrophe Humor

Mark Twain Circle of America

Mark Twain in the West

Observatoire de l'Humour

Humor: Mirror of Society

The Association for the Study of Play

Humor and Play: Partners in Child Development

And finally, the Conference has planned a one-act comedy competition across the first four evenings plus a special exhibit on Mark Twain in the West, organized with the UC Berkeley Bancroft Library.

The 2015 ISHS conference invites research papers, symposia, and workshops on humor within the thematic areas of (1) Cognition and Creativity, (2) Public and Private Discourse, (3) Individual Styles, (4) Culture, Gender, and Diversity, and (5) Health and Well-Being. We also invite submissions for the one-act comedy competition. *The deadline for all submissions is March 15, 2015.* Registration, submission, and accommodation information is now available through www.humorstudies.org and on the Conference website at www.hnu.edu/ishs/ISHS2015. Inquiries can be sent to the ISHS Executive Secretary and Conference Convener, Martin Lampert at ishs@hnu.edu or to Conference at ishs2015@hnu.edu.

Upcoming Events

41st Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Play

University of San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas, USA, March 4-7, 2015

The 41st Annual Meeting of The Association for the Study of Play will be held from March 4 to 7, 2015 at the University of San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas, USA. The 2015 TASP Conference's theme will be *Play across the Lifespan*. The proposal deadline is November 14, 2014. For information, contact Eva Nwokah at playconference2015@ollusa.edu or visit the TASP website at www.tasplay.org/about-us/conference.

28th Meeting of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, May 29-31, 2015

The 28th Conference of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor will be held May 29-31, 2015 at the Penn's Landing Hyatt Regency in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. The theme of the 28th AATH Conference will be *Stayin' Alive: Keeping Your Brain Healthy & Active with Humor*. For more information, visit the AATH Conference page at <http://www.aath.org>.

15th International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter

Saint Petersburg, Russia, July 13-18, 2015

The 15th International Summer School and Symposium on Humour and Laughter will be held in Saint Petersburg, Russia from July 13 to July 18. Alyona Ivanova and Sergei Troitckii are the organizers. For more information, visit the summer school website at <http://humoursummerschool.org/15/>.

Humor in Popular Culture

Colby-Sawyer College, New Hampshire, October 30-31, 2015

Colby-Sawyer College, New Hampshire, October 30-31, 2015, Association (NEPCA) is seeking papers on the topic of humor in popular culture for its annual conference on the campus of Colby-Sawyer College. The deadline for paper proposals is June 15, 2015. For more information visit the conference website at <http://https://nepca.wordpress.com/fall-conference/> or contact Virginia Freed at vfreed@baypath.edu.

4th LAFAL Symposium

University of Łódź, Poland, March 17-18, 2016

The theme of the fourth LAFAL symposium will be “Theoretical Issues in Humour: Building Bridges across Disciplines.” The symposium provides a forum for linguists who are interested in concepts and language issues of relevance to humor research. Plenary Speakers will be Alexander Brock, Raymond Gibbs, James Mahon, Limor Shifman, and Francisco Yus. Paper proposal can be sent to marta.dynel@yahoo.com. The deadline for all submissions is October 5, 2015.

Book Reviews

High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson

From Robert Phiddian, *Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia*

Kate Heard. (2013). *High Spirits: The Comic Art of Thomas Rowlandson*. London: Royal Collection Trust (distrib. University of Chicago Press). 256 pp., 150 color plates. ISBN 10: 1905686765; ISBN 13: 9781905686766.

It is a common error to assume that manners get stricter and more humourless the further one goes back in time. There is no quicker way of exploding this myth than to confront the mystified with a collection of prints from late eighteenth-century England. Yes, they did have sex before the 1960s, Virginia. And Thomas Rowlandson (1757-1827) shows men and women enjoying it.

James Gillray (1756/7 – 1815) is generally and justly the most famous of the Regency caricaturists, with his scarifying travesties of figures from the Revolution conflicts, but Thomas Rowlandson’s more rounded and humorous images of the Prince Regent and of Charles Fox give a fuller image of the experience of life in the era. In an intensely political age, he is more the social commentator, though one of the reasons given for the Prince Regent having such a fine collection of Rowlandson originals is a desire to take them out of circulation. Plenty of personal and political edge remains. This finely reproduced collection does indeed come from the Royal Collection started then, and a Foreword by that great and heedless comic genius, the Duke of Edinburgh, validly points to the appealing quirkiness of a royal family that preserves such wonderful visual libels at their own expense.

Though this is a big and sumptuous book, it is only a selection of Rowlandson’s work. This volume reprints well over a hundred Rowlandsons and plenty of comparison images from contemporary artists. However, the water-coloured print was a prolific medium: as Kate Heard’s introduction suggests, “he produced a vast body of drawings. The surviving examples are thought to number around 10,000 sheets” (29). Even after a century or so of being seriously collectable, the number remains an estimate because, as is so often the case when genuinely original art arrives on the scene, few took it seriously at the time. So the drawings were spread widely, and any single volume can only be a selection. If any scholar has the stamina to attempt a *catalogue raisonné* of Rowlandson’s work, it will need to be a database.

Prints and their successor, comics, have always lived on the margin between art and popular entertainment. Like Hogarth before him, Rowlandson only found his medium when he left behind the strictures of Academic art, to draw for a popular audience rather than for wealthy patrons. Even the best of formal eighteenth-century portraiture retains a tinge of pomposity that is gone from the spontaneous line of Revolution era prints. As a political satirist, Rowlandson drew what he was paid to draw, mostly on the Tory side. But it was as a social commentator and an exceedingly happy pornographer that he excelled. At a conference in Sydney recently I saw compelling evidence that Jane and Cassandra Austen saw an under-the-counter image of Fox and his confreres presented as school boys – Regency England was a small and imperfectly compartmentalised world.

This volume is remarkable for its wonderful reproductions of the hand-coloured prints that are so distinctive of the period. As the scale of print culture ramped up through the nineteenth century, colour largely disappeared from popular art and media for nearly 150 years. And the colour here is truly extraordinary—often better, I suspect, than would have been the experience of most viewers of the time, given the then variability of paint and paper. It is probably pedantic on my part, but I sometimes felt that images and colours had been photoshopped a bit beyond the point of probability. The images gain a freshness that faded paint and paper in a museum cannot give, so there are pros and cons for either path.

The commentary is detailed and its tone politely antiquarian. This works well for the accounts of particular images; if you know a bit about the art and history of the period, then the descriptions provide succinct and relevant information. The introductory essays, however, are no better than serviceable, neither clearly biographical nor projecting a clear interpretation of Rowlandson's *oeuvre*. They provide solidly researched information but a bit miscellaneous arrayed. The general reader wanting a vivid introduction to the art and its ambience would do better to go to the chapter on Rowlandson in Vic Gatrell's *The First Bohemians: Life and Art in London's Golden Age* (2013). There one finds a compelling account of how and why Rowlandson is such a consummate artist of Regency life – but the reproductions (at least in the 2014 Penguin edition) are small and often grainy.

So get *High Spirits* for the pictures and *The First Bohemians* for the narrative, and feast on one of British art's great humourists.

References

Vic Gatrell. (2013). *The First Bohemians: Life and Art in London's Golden Age*. London: Allen Lane.

Riveted: The Science of Why Jokes Make Us Laugh, Movies Make Us Cry, and Religion Makes Us Feel One with the Universe

From Alexander Kozintsev, *Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Saint-Petersburg, Russia*

Jim Davies. (2014). *Riveted: The Science of Why Jokes Make Us Laugh, Movies Make Us Cry, and Religion Makes Us Feel One With the Universe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 282 pp. ISBN: 978-1-137-27901-9.

Why, indeed, do jokes make us laugh? Were it not for that question, which has plagued many generations of humor scholars, myself included, I'd never have taken up writing this review. Jim Davies, a cognitive scientist, comic improviser, playwright, theater director, and visual artist focusing on non-orthodox calligraphy and Pac-Man art (see his weird acrylic cartoons about computer ghosts at <http://www.jimdavies.org/art/pac-man/>), was definitely entitled to write this book. Who else would venture to pose, let alone answer all these questions?

"I'll do something," Davies claims, "that has never been done before and show how all these phenomena can be explained with the foundations of *compellingness*" (p. 2). If this claim strikes you as being too strong, don't worry—it turns out to be quite innocuous when we are told that compellingness has six dimensions: we are highly social beings; we have hopes and fears; we delight in patterns; we like to explore incongruities; we exhibit many psychological biases; and we have inborn propensities. In short, "our bias to perceive and be interested in people means that information about people and social relationships makes everything more compelling" (p. 24). "The social compellingness theory holds that our interest in people comes from a need to understand the social world we live in" (p. 39). In fact none of this sounds too provocative—except for the word *compellingness*. "I wish *compellingness* was a word", one blogger complained, without naming

Davies's book, and another one wrote, "Wish as I might, it's not a word." No such obstacle anymore! Now it's a word—almost a term.

So why do jokes make us laugh? Why are we "riveted" (one more quasi-term) by them, given that "people will be riveted by what they hope or fear is true", but not by neutral stimuli (p. 64)? Were white Americans riveted by elephant jokes because, as Alan Dundes (1987, pp. 51-54) thought, they feared blacks whom the elephants symbolized? Are we in the presence of another Freudian? Are there no such things as innocent humor and nonsense humor? What, for that matter, is humor in general?

"Humor occurs," we are told, "when there is a feeling of danger along with an assurance of safety" (p. 127). However, it is immediately evident that this condition is neither necessary nor sufficient. How does the feeling of danger occur in nonsense humor? Conversely, should horror movies, which meet the above criterion, be classified as humor? Without citing it, Davies revives J. C. Gregory's almost century-old "damn theory of laughter" (Gregory, 1924, p. 191), when he writes that the use of profanity in stand-up comedy "is effective because it involves a signal for danger, but is delivered in a safe setting so it makes us laugh", and that the same may apply to tickling (p. 128). But again we are not informed why other danger signals delivered in a safe context such as serious art or religion don't seem funny to us: conversely they may seem distressing and thus evoke Davies's second question: "Why do movies (novels, sermons, plays, musical works, paintings, etc.) make us cry?" The question of what opposes humor to these other phenomena is simply not posed, much less answered in the book. Humor, we are told, may stem from the pleasure of contemplating the incongruity between what is predicted and what is perceived (pp. 128-129). For one thing, was it not Schopenhauer, whom Davies does not mention, rather than the cognitive scientist Bruce Katz, who first formulated this view? For another, rather than funny, aren't many incongruities of that kind relieving, upsetting, annoying, amazing or simply meaningless for us?

Davies touches on an issue that might be relevant to the questions he raises. "We are of two minds," he writes; "we have 'double knowledge'" (p. 28). Our brain consists of older and newer parts. They act and react differently, which occasionally results in mental conflict. One of the best-known examples is the functional asymmetry of the brain. Profanities and sacred clichés are stored not in the dominant (normally left) hemisphere, which is involved in speech, but in the subdominant, evolutionally conservative one. Accordingly Davies asks if humor, like profanity, is controlled by the older parts of our brain; a dubious proposition. Back in the 1970s Gardner and Brownell found that damage to the evolutionally "newer" left hemisphere, forcing its "older" counterpart to function on its own, renders the individual serious and humorless. On the other hand damage to the right hemisphere can produce the opposite effect: any incongruity at all is perceived as funny, but this again does not involve humor (Brownell and Gardner, 1988).

Apparently what matters is the conflict between the new and the old brain. Sergei Eisenstein, building on the ideas such as Herbert Spencer's "descending incongruity" (Spencer, 1911/1863, p. 310) and Alexander Bain's "comic degradation" (Bain, 1880, p.259), described comedy as an "escape down the developmental ladder" (Eisenstein, 1968/1945, pp. 496). Bizarre as it sounds, his claim that humor is based on a futile attempt to combine two polar opposites—the view of a philistine and that of a savage (Eisenstein, 1966/posthumous, pp. 481-482)—is supported by modern neurological evidence suggesting that humor and laughter indeed involve a clash between evolutionally older and newer parts of the brain. The result is a pleasurable liberation from emotion, detachment, "temporary anaesthesia of the heart", as Henri Bergson put it. No such conflict is involved in serious art, religion, sports, gossip or computer games, where pleasure is derived from the enhancement, not from the disabling of emotion. That's why movies make us cry and religion makes us feel one with the universe.

Both skepticism and "willing suspension of disbelief" are serious; and occasional oscillation between them (Davies may be right in ascribing it to the rivalry between the newer and older parts of the brain) does not undermine the interplay of meanings in serious art and religion. How very different is the explosive clash of neural activity that annihilates the meaning of an entire joke, not just of one of its alternative scripts! (Vaid et al., 2003). Most humor specialists neglect this covert subjective conflict because it is overshadowed by overt objective conflicts mirrored by the ostensible semantics of humor. The overlap of opposed semantic scripts at the text level can be perceived as serious, meaningful and emotionally charged. At the subjective level, by contrast, the pragmatic opposition of two overlapping viewpoints, one of which parodically degrades the other, is subversive of seriousness, meaning and emotion, and thus inherently fraught with laughter.

“To reflect briefly on the very book you’re reading, it is mostly mystery,” Davies tells us; “I present problems to pique interest and then present solutions I hope the reader will find elegant and satisfying” (p. 144). I agree that the book makes pleasant reading; no doubt, many general readers will find it both “compelling” and “riveting”. However the scholar will hardly find the solutions the author proposes satisfying. In essence his book demonstrates, eloquently and for the thousandth time, that humans are highly social beings. What it neither demonstrates nor even mentions is that we are riveted by jokes, which make us laugh, and by movies, which make us cry, in fundamentally different ways.

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Comedy Writing for Late Night TV

From Mary Ann Rishel, *Weill Cornell Medical College-Qatar and Ithaca College*

Toplyn, Joe. (2014). *Comedy Writing for Late-Night TV*. New York: Twenty Lane Media. 430 pp. ISBN (13) 9780615953892.

Comedy Writing for Late-Night TV, by Joe Toplyn, delivers on tap for beginning writers with step-by-step techniques to create jokes, monologues and visual-verbal set pieces that generate the humor for late-night talk shows. Toplyn comes to the book well qualified, with decades of experience in American television as co-head writer for the *Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, as head writer for the *Late Show* (CBS) and as writer for *Late Night* (NBC) with David Letterman, and as writer for the highly successful comedy detective series, *Monk*. His comedic television work has been recognized with numerous Emmy nominations for excellence in television production.

In this practicum book for novice comedy writers, Toplyn introduces elements of late-night comedy such as the host, sidekick, guests, performers, and studio audience, then offers detailed suggestions, through scripted and semi-scripted variations, for writing openings, desk bits, jokes, ad-libs, sketches, found comedy, parodies, and off-site pieces. At the end of each chapter, Toplyn summarizes for review and easy reference. Of special interest to hopeful professionals, the book includes sections on how to write a submission packet for selling free-lance jokes to television producers and advice on how to get a permanent job as a comedy writer.

As the central prompts for creating humor, Toplyn employs brainstorming and mapping, which are standard techniques from creativity theory and humor studies, and recommends that beginning writers draw on current events as sources for topics. Additional prompts include the Five W questions (who, what, when, where, why) and imaging techniques that probe the obvious, the nonsensical and the associative. Further prompts invite visualization, comparison, contextual scrutiny, divergence, and exploration. Well-structured for recursive learning, the exercises allow the beginning writer to advance steps from a previous chapter as the means to strengthen the next task.

While Toplyn’s definitions are clearly stated, his most effective teaching tools come from the examples. He suggests brainstorming with joke bits like the *Top Ten Lists* for “Things Overheard,” “Perks of Winning a Nobel Prize,” and “Product Labels.” For the “Top Ten Signs You’re at a Bad Beach,” he

includes, among others, #3: “Five minutes after you finish your sand castle it has cockroaches” and #1: “It’s Bring-Your-Own-Sand” (p. 125-136). In an example of “What Were They Thinking?” Toplyn describes a Found Comedy Photo Piece with a clip of a young man on a skateboard. The caption is: “This is the last time I ride Greyhound’s Economy Class” (p. 183). Possibilities for jokes are endless, and the novice writer can easily envision the creative techniques from the examples. The topics also imply observations about politics, culture and human behavior. Unlike a Bloom’s taxonomy for creative thinking, however, tasks do not increase in difficulty and sophistication; nevertheless, this is good basic instruction.

What this book is not. This is not a scholarly book about humor theory. Toplyn tips his hat to superiority and surprise theories, but his attempts at foundations for humor are one-sentence classifications presented without analysis (p. 173, 176, 179, 185, 308, 317, 327). Still, by omitting long discussions of theory, he makes the intelligent and sensible choice to place the needs of the novice student first. For scholars, the debate on humor theory is fascinating, and possibly unending; for a teacher of beginning writers, Toplyn is right in not overburdening the novice with complex information at the initial stages of learning.

A few loose threads in this book, however, would benefit from clearer explanations. Toplyn states that a punchline has to be “true” to be funny, a general statement that could be difficult for a beginning writer to understand (p. 71-73). For example, what is the “truth” in the following joke that forms the punchline and, therefore, the humor? *A company in Seattle just came out with a new bacon-flavored soda. So if you love the taste of bacon and you love the taste of soda, you’re about to realize how much you love them separately* (LNWJF – Jimmy Fallon, p. 101).

A terrific joke. But for the general principle of “truth” to work in humor, students need to understand that the extra punch in this punchline derives not just from the fact that a new bacon-flavored soda has been produced, which is itself funny, and the joke could stop there, but that the joke also derives from the clash with several underlying “truths” (“crazy entrepreneurs come up with crazy products—and there are customers dumb enough to buy them” and “ugh...no reasonable person would drink this awful tasting product...what were these guys thinking?”). Novice writers who are stuck, who write “jokes” that no one finds funny, would benefit from discussion about how to clash surface facts with underlying premises. This can be taught with more examples and more analysis of premises.

That said, Toplyn intuitively understands what a new writer brings--and does not bring--to the learning experience. He has common sense. Formulaic as his book may be, it offers the beginning writer what that writer needs: clear, step-by-step, inch-by-inch recursive practice. Also, Toplyn is especially respectful of the novice who wants to be a professional: he wants that writer to succeed.

In addition to beginning writers, others who might find this book useful are health care counselors who treat clients with humor therapy and public school teachers who want their students to practice divergent thinking.

As a highly successful comedy writer, Toplyn is imaginative and clever. As a teacher, he is a natural.

Poking a Dead Frog: Conversations with Today’s Top Comedy Writers

From Eric Weitz, Trinity College

Mike Sacks. (2014). *Poking a Dead Frog: Conversations with Today's Top Comedy Writers*. New York: Penguin. 453 pp. ISBN 9780143123781.

The title image of *Poking a Dead Frog: Conversations with Today's Top Comedy Writers*, refers to a common strain of practitioner skepticism once articulated by E. B. White. Mike Sacks, an inquiring comedy fan who is also an author and journalist, quotes in his “Introduction” to the volume White’s often misrepresented contention that, “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.” Sacks does White the service of continuing with one of the writer’s further observations – that humor “has a certain fragility, an evasiveness, which one had best respect” (p. xvii) – and goes on to preside over the entire operation as a safe and respectful pair of hands.

Practice and theory have long eyed one another warily across the imaginary divide between doing and theorizing. In this case, cover quotes from the likes of Bob Odenkirk and Will Ferrell suggest that Sacks

has done well from the perspective of an accomplished practitioner. He has, in fact, drawn together an interesting and informative collection of dialogues with people who have made good livings as comedy writers or cartoonists.

The book's animating project is to offer advice, both pragmatic and idealistic, for aspiring comic writers, and consequently in overview the following themes emerge from the entries: Go forth and make people laugh in a way that is true to yourself and your own evolving humor, in a world for which commercial interests have always called the shots. As the reins are held ever more tightly by corporate overlords, the wide open spaces of the internet represent an unprecedented proving ground for the discovery and cultivation of your individual comic voice. Be nice to each other – and if you can think of any other way than comedy writing that you might conceivably make a living, definitely go with that one. Overall, a general sense emerges that would-be comic writers should jettison notions of natural talent simply waiting to be discovered through persistence and luck: rather, professional-calibre humor and its expression requires conscious cultivation through continual writing and rewriting, whether that occurs in the grand arc of a career or in the micro-shaping of an individual joke. There is nevertheless much of value in this book for the professional frog-killers among us, even though it is not a scholarly book, per se. Sacks has succeeded in drawing out practitioners, from latter-day legends to today's high-profile comic writers, to have an analytical go at humor. Useful points of entry arise for scholarly thought with regard to the creative process, the mechanics of humor and the processes by which it meets its audience.

The book cycles between three general types of entry, with The Interview as its backbone. Supplying a biographical and professional context for each subject, Sacks maintains an industry-aware and humor-savvy style in discussion with his interviewees, prodding them to rummage through their experiences for interesting anecdotes about what went on in the comic engine rooms of, for example, sitcoms and late-night television shows we have known so well. He manages to coax some detailed thought about how and why things happened, and in the process raises issues well worth contemplating by members of the academy. The concept of the late-night host's "desk piece" for example represents a generic comic sub-form worth studying, with its specially tailored needs and strategies.

The interviews also comprise a set of anecdotal case studies on the formation of a comic sensibility. Recollections by the likes of Henry Beard, co-creator of the "Harvard Lampoon"; Peg Lynch, whose *Ethel and Albert* is not only considered by some the first situation comedy, but the ur-*Seinfeld* in its humour of the everyday; longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast; and all-around famous funny guy, Mel Brooks, all lend on-the-ground insight into some important threads in the history of comedy writing over the past near-century.

The Ultraspecific Comedic Knowledge sections are some of the most directly relevant to a humour studies perspective. These entries involve proven practitioners giving in some cases close analytical readings of humor texts: Todd Levin presents and then critiques the writing-pack his younger self submitted for *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, while Will Tracy, Editor-in-Chief of the *Onion*, offers a list of write-in suggestions for headlines and precisely why they weren't used, along with a handful of unsolicited submissions that *were* used. Their analyses speak astutely to the mechanics of joking and are no less valuable for lack of simultaneous translation into academic terms. These are people who think about what they do (whether or not they like to admit it), and so we gain access to their specialist comic territories and to some of their sub-categories or habits. Bruce Vilanch, for example, talks about "Writing Jokes for Awards Shows" specifically the Oscars (even though they rarely get used).

The most compact entries come under the heading of Pure, Hard-Core Advice, addressing the strictly pragmatic concerns of the would-be comedy writer. Comic heads like Megan Amram and Patton Oswalt offer thoughts on, for example, how to get started, how to keep going, the subject of agents, and whether you should be thinking about this in the first place. There is frequent reference to the dynamic of team creativity, both practically and pragmatically. Amy Poehler, for example, alludes to both: "Being flexible can mean people want to work with you. A lot of people say fight for what you believe in and don't let them change it, but I want to say, fight less, and be open to the fact that other people might have a better idea." (p. 300)

Despite having a target audience to which most humor scholars would not belong, *Poking a Dead Frog* is persistently engaging in a behind-the-scenes fashion. It also opens upon a variety of fertile areas for academic inquiry in the ways that comedy writers talk about their craft and the moveable parts of creativity itself.

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La Clownterapia: Teoria e Pratiche

From Laura Vagnoli, *Children's Meyer Hospital, Florence, Italy*

Alberto Dionigi and Paola Gremigni. (Eds.). (2014). *La Clownterapia: Teoria e Pratiche [Clown Therapy: Theories and Techniques]*. Rome: Carocci Editore. 229 pp. ISBN 978-88-7466-693-5.

Dionigi and Gremigni's work offers an extensive overview of clowning. The text provides a historical and theoretical account of clowns, supported by examples and quotations from some of the major professionals in the field. Using a pragmatic approach, it explores a wide variety of activities in contexts such as hospitals, schools, training facilities, etc., but with special reference to Italian culture. On a practical level, the work provides tools and draws guidelines based on rigorous ethical and deontological principles on how to be a good therapeutic clown.

The use of humor has been steadily growing in psychosocial and healthcare settings, especially through the work of clowns. Positive thinking and mirth are becoming increasingly important as they provide a general improvement in interpersonal relations and contribute to the creation of more relaxed and cooperative environments. An increasing number of researchers acknowledge the therapeutic value of laughter and smiling, supporting their use not only in the treatment of traditional illnesses but also for physical and psychological well-being. Consequently the presence of clowns is currently becoming a recurrent feature in several pediatric and adult hospitals, old-age facilities, refugee camps, palliative care facilities, rehabilitation centers, schools and prisons.

Reflecting the rapid increase in the use of clowns around the world, Dionigi and Gremigni have observed a growing gap between the two extremes of professionalism and accountability: on the higher level, we find professional performing artists, with specialties ranging from music to magic, who have been carefully selected and trained to apply their skills to special needs; the other end of the spectrum is occupied by well-intentioned and simply-dressed volunteer clowns with little training and often little understanding of the responsibilities implied in being a therapeutic clown. For this reason, it is both timely and appropriate to examine various forms of clowning.

Clown Therapy: Theories and Techniques thus represents a solid contribution to the contemporary clowning literature by outlining the dominant theories, themes and issues surrounding the study of clowns, including their various strengths and weaknesses. The book comprises eight chapters, each of which deals with different aspects of clowning and presents different examples of its application. The first two chapters give an overview of the history of clowning, Dionigi and Gremigni offering a tour of historical antecedents such as medieval fools and jesters, before discussing circus and theater clowns and the more recent phenomenon of clowns used in medical and social situations. They describe the principal types, including the whiteface clown with a sophisticated character as opposed to clumsy auguste clowns, and the manner in which they orchestrate funny occurrences. Moreover specific attention is dedicated to Michael Christensen who created the first Clown Care Unit in New York in 1986.

Chapters three and four seek to clarify the position and role of clowns, such as their peculiar function of using humor to promote people's well-being in different contexts and with respect to people's various emotions. The authors remind us that humour can help us to laugh at ourselves as well as to face and cope with challenging situations, and that at the heart of a clown's practice lie playfulness, curiosity, non-judgment and creativity. In chapters five and seven particular consideration is given to the training strategies involved in preparing clowns to exercise their art before a vulnerable audience: clowning is one of the most demanding scenic arts; the actor must have high-level artistic skills and master multiple techniques, while retaining the ability to improvise and to adapt to many types of public environment. In order to protect their public, clowns should have knowledge and experience even of security and hygiene regulations.

In chapter six the authors include a detailed review of the relevant research literature. Despite the growing number of clown programs, there is a paucity of studies on the subject. Furthermore the few studies

that have been carried out have not been widely disseminated. In particular they specify a need for research to evaluate the impact of clowning on social and healthcare settings and, more specifically, the role that therapeutic clowns play in the well-being of patients, their families, and healthcare providers. Indeed studies have shown that their work contributes significantly to reducing anxiety among patients and their families prior to and during medical procedures. The text shows that clowns may help greatly to alleviate the difficulties that prevail during the course of an illness and in other sensitive environments.

A general overview of psychological considerations is presented in chapter eight. Here Dionigi and Gremigni discuss the importance of supervision in order to improve psychological skills, self-care and the level of responsibility. They analyze what leads people to become clowns, how they can handle contact with pain and discomfort, as well as how they can prevent burnout: clowns must learn how to set both personal and professional boundaries, and how to develop the capacity to meaningfully reflect on emotions by using various tools and methods.

In their eight chapters the authors thus cover a considerable breadth of material relevant to clowning while making their book clearly accessible to beginners, particularly by adopting such an easy and straightforward register. Meant for a general readership, it can be considered both a starting point for the deeper investigation of the complexity of clowning and a guide for those who would like to start a clowning career. At the same time it is an invaluable resource both for students who want to study clowning, and for clowns who want to update and deepen their own skills and knowledge.

How about Never—Is Never Good for You? My Life in Cartoons

From John Lent, Editor-in-Chief, International Journal of Comic Art

Bob Mankoff. (2014). *How about Never -- Is Never Good for You? My Life in Cartoons*. New York: Henry Holt and Co. 285 pp. 250 black-and-white ill. ISBN: 978-0-8050-9590-6 (hardcover); ISBN: 978-0-8050-9591-3 (e-book).

This reviewer read Bob Mankoff's life in, and out of, cartoons twice. Not because it is a dense, theoretical, gobbledygook-filled thesis about humorous cartoons, nor that the reviewer is dim-witted and slow to catch on. The reason then? Because the book is so much fun to read – full of *The New Yorker* cartoons and Mankoff's sharp-witted prose.

Mankoff has us all over the place -- tolerating his Jewish mother's presence on him and his high-tailing it into graduate school to dodge the draft during the Vietnam War; following his briefest of brief history of cartooning or his deconstruction of *The New Yorker* cartoons; learning his formula for winning *The New Yorker* Cartoon Caption Contest or his explanation of the sources of cartoons. Yet, despite the meandering, it somehow all comes together -- the tidbits about what *The New Yorker* is all about, about Mankoff's whereabouts before and at *The New Yorker*, and about what beginners must know about to break into the magazine.

Though the book is fun in the way thoughts and suggestions are expressed, it is equally serious in its endeavor to provide a behind-the-scenes look at the cartooning craft. Mankoff just uses his own advice in the telling: "Anything worth saying is worth saying funny." Though he nearly finished a Ph.D. degree, Mankoff learned about cartooning elsewhere, at the New York Public Library, where he studied all *The New Yorker* cartoons. He found the cartoons made viewers think, and that to draw them, "You had to be a participant in the experience, up-to-date on the latest trends and buzzwords, aware of the world around you, and possessing a mental flexibility able to appreciate different comic visions, techniques, and talents."

Even after deconstructing thousands of *The New Yorker* cartoons to see what they were made of, and selling his cartoons to many magazines, he still did not get into *The New Yorker* himself. Mankoff then worked on finding his own style, settling on stippling, the creation of images with dots. The very time-consuming process paid off: after more than 500 rejections, he finally sold his first cartoon to *The New Yorker* in 1977. In addition to "memoiring" his "first time", Mankoff relates "that delicious moment" when others of his generation (Mick Stevens, Jack Ziegler, Michael Maslin, and Roz Chast) also sold their first *The New Yorker* cartoon. Initially, Mankoff's *The New Yorker* cartoons were primarily visual until he realized he was not doing justice to his own sense of humor -- "highly verbal, quick with a quip, a retort, a rant, or a riff."

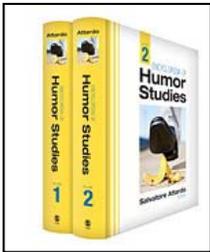
Perhaps besides his 18 years as cartoon editor for *The New Yorker* (a post he acquired on editor Tina Brown's watch), Mankoff's chief contributions to the magazine were leading it into the digital age and creating the Cartoon Bank, which makes *The New Yorker* vault of more than 78,000 cartoons available to publishers and the public for purchase and licensing. As cartoon editor, he was responsible for selecting 14,000 works suitable for print out of hundreds of thousands (maybe millions).

Mankoff informs us how he and others (Roz Chast and David Sipress) come up with ideas for their own cartoons -- by writing phrases, doodling, drawing on the "cartoon unconscious," looking at current events, or sorting through ideas and happenings jotted down through the course of a day. He also provides seven rules of thumb he uses to select cartoons --including telling us that originality is over-rated, that many submitted cartoons have already been done, that favorite cartoonists are likely to come through with funny works, that "new news is good news" (timeliness), and how to edit. In Chapter 13, Mankoff recounts how *The New Yorker* cartoon caption contest came about in 1999, how it works, who some of its failed contestants have been, and, importantly, how to win it.

What Mankoff has achieved with *How about Never* is a book that is highly readable, extremely funny and yet very informative about *The New Yorker* cartoons and about comic art more generally. He has shown that instruction is effective when given with a dosage of light-heartedness and levity. I might even read the book a third time.

Recent Publications

The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies



Salvatore Attardo, Editor. (2014). *The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Pub., Inc. 2 Vols. 929 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4129-9909-0. Hardcover.

From the Publisher

The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies explores the concept of humor in history and modern society in the United States and internationally. This work's scope encompasses the humor of children, adults, and even nonhuman primates throughout the ages, from crude jokes and simple slapstick to sophisticated word play and ironic parody and satire. As an academic social history, it includes the perspectives of a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, child development, social psychology, life style history, communication, and entertainment media. Readers will develop an understanding of the importance of humor as it has developed globally throughout history and appreciate its effects on child and adult development, especially in the areas of health, creativity, social development, and imagination. This two-volume set is available in both print and electronic formats.

Recent Articles in Humor Studies

The Humorous Times announces recent articles from *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research* and by researchers who publish elsewhere within humor studies. The following list, compiled by the ISHS Executive Secretary for the online ISHS bibliographies, includes humor studies articles published since December 2014. If you have a recent publication, let us know. We will include it in a future newsletter.

Akyel, E. (2014). #Direnkahkaha (Resist Laughter): Laughter is a revolutionary action. *Feminist Media Studies*, 14(6), 1093-1094. doi: 10.1080/14680777.2014.975437

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