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Books

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No laughing matter

by [Christie Davies](#)

A review of *Stop Me If You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes* by Jim Holt.

According to the press release from the publisher of *Stop Me If You've Heard This*, “there has never been a scholarly understanding of the perplexing and pleasing art” of telling jokes. In fact there have been many, several of them far better than this one. The publisher calls it “an unfailingly brilliant analysis of just what makes them so funny (or not).” Brilliant it ain't.

You can not easily tell whether a joke is funny just from a text; too much depends on the narrative and theatrical skills of the teller. Jokes are an oral phenomenon and are composed by accretion as they spread by word of mouth. Often they are never written down, perhaps because of fear of censorship or because no one thought them worth preserving. This is why any account of jokes relying only on published sources is defective, and Mr. Holt can not be said to have toiled in a folklore archive, even though he must have known from Alan Dundes what and where they were.

Further, there are no agreed standards allowing one to decide that one joke or type of joke is funny and another is not. Tastes differ between individuals, social classes, eras, and cultures. You can not reduce funniness to questions of structure or cleverness, anymore than you can reduce judgments about paintings just to matters of technique, whatever the academicians may think. Mr. Holt's distinctions between the funny and the unfunny turn out to be largely subjective, and the author's analysis is merely a legitimation of his own preferences. He quotes three jokes from Freud and classes them as excellent, middling, and dated. I disagree with his ranking; how is he going to convince me? He says rightly that “When it comes to phrasing Freud is no Henny Youngman,” but this again comes back to the difference between written texts which are trapped in the writing conventions of their time and “the way he tells 'em.” Besides, Freud may have felt that a scholar has to be faithful to his sources and not pep them up.

When Holt does get it right, it is often because he has reinvented the axle. I found little here that was new and creative. There are some good jokes in the book, but even then, all too often you want to say “stop, I've heard it before.” It is a pity Mr. Holt did not heed his own title.

The history section is perfunctory. It begins with the Greeks and the *Philogelos*; Sumerian and ancient Egyptian readers will be surprised and offended. There is then a sudden jump to the Italian humorist Poggio Bracciolini's *Facetiae* and then to the eighteenth-century *Joe Miller's Jests*. He claims on the basis of Zhukov's memoirs that Stalin never laughed heartily. His court jester, Pauker, would have disagreed. Who is more likely to know more about the monster's laughter? There are brief excursions to tell us about the major contributions to humor scholarship of Nathan Schmulowitz, who founded the finest humor library in the world; of my friend the late Alan Dundes, the great folklorist of jokes; and of the idiosyncratic Gershon Legman, who compiled and published

two huge volumes of exceptionally dirty jokes. It is difficult to see why the author needs to tell us that Schmulowitz was “stout and balding” or that Legman was “a handsome man, five foot nine inches tall.” (Holt should keep his journalistic babble for the tabloids.) What difference would it make if Legman had been five-foot-eight or five-foot-ten and Schmulowitz thin and possessed of a good mop of carrot hair? Holt can’t see the wood for the weeds. This is not a history; indeed, it isn’t even a book. It is an ill-assorted set of old notes.

The philosophy section is a little better, but it bundles together the philosophical analyses of jokes by Hobbes, Bergson, *et al.* with incidental funny remarks made by such philosophers as Bertrand Russell. It is difficult to see where much of the more analytical material comes from, given the very sparse bibliography; I can only hope that it was not chance conversations or phoning up busy academics or even Wikipedia.

In the case of Freud, the author accepts far too much of that psychoanalyst’s work as being plausible. Holt suggests, for example, that Freudian theory may account for national tastes in obscene jokes such as “homosexual jokes among the English, oral-genital jokes among Americans and of jokes about cuckolds ... among the French.” The last of these is possibly true of the land of Panurge and Feydeau but is there any evidence at all to back up the other generalizations? Even if these assertions were true, you would need *quite independent* factual evidence about national attitudes and behavior to provide a rational explanation for them. Where is it?

Needless to say, Mr. Holt either is or feels he must parade himself as an apologetic and apoplectic liberal when it comes to racial and ethnic jokes or even jokes about the humorlessness of lesbians:

Q: How many lesbians does it take to change a light bulb?

A: That’s not funny!

(In fact, lesbians have a very good senses of humor; it is feminists who lack one). Holt claims that the telling of such jokes “strikes us as unethical, especially when the butt of those jokes is a vulnerable or oppressed part of society.” Why “us”? Is Mr. Holt Queen Victoria, or is he making the arrogant liberal assumption that no one could possibly disagree with his crass and priggish ideology? Most people do not regard the telling of such jokes as unethical. Even if one did and were to draw up a rank order of unethical behaviors, for any reasonable person such joke telling would not even make the top thousand. Chuck it, Holt.

The author is entitled to the prejudices of his privileged class in this respect, but the broad masses do not share them. When people like Holt are not listening, they regularly tell and enjoy such jokes without any guilt or doubts whatsoever. Holt also tries to claim that such jokes are ugly and lacking in art, a claim contrary to Kantian aesthetics and made in ignorance of empirical findings that people can enjoy and appreciate jokes whose subjects they find aversive. He then tries to prove his case by providing examples that are not the best of their genre, a somewhat unethical maneuver.

Mr. Holt is rumored to have written this book in preference to his projected great work on the meaning of the cosmos. He would have done better to stick to his original plan, for that subject is easier and it is a suitable topic for an amateur. Jokes are far trickier than he can even begin to realize. If he had read the more professional work on jokes and humor of his contemporaries such as Abe, Attardo, Basu, Chafe, Chiaro, Chlopicki, Galanter, Krikmann, Kuipers, Raskin, Ruch, and Ziv, and also more of Oring’s work, he might have begun to realize how difficult the study of jokes is. No one can object to Holt’s writing a nice little throwaway essay about jokes to amuse the casual reader, but for W. W. Norton & Co. to pretend that this is an important book is sheer impudence.

Christie Davies is the author of *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* (Transaction).

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