

sure as consumption and considering the expanded possibilities of human expression, joy, and play.

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### **Practically Joking**

*Moira Marsh*

Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2015. List of figures, references, index, and index of practical joke examples. 208 pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780874219838

Moira Marsh's *Practically Joking* contributes significantly to the history of play and the study of humor. The book establishes practical jokes as worthy of investigation while also suggesting the necessity for subsequent inquiry.

Contextualizing practical joking within the history of play, Marsh seeks to correct the historiographical narrative that frames practical jokes as "too unsophisticated for serious attention" (p. 2). She sets out to prove that, to the contrary, practical jokes represent a "lively expressive play tradition that includes both sophistication and intellectual satisfaction" (p. 3). By this measure, *Practically Joking* is a rousing success. Marsh convincingly argues that practical jokes are a rich subject of study that highlight, interrogate, and sometimes subvert subtle undercurrents in social life and public culture.

*Practically Joking* is written straightforwardly with a logical, accessible structure. Beginning by defining a practical joke as "a scripted, unilateral play performance involving two opposed parties—trickster

and target—with the goal of incorporating the target into play without his or her knowledge, permission, or both," Marsh then delineates practical joking into types (p. 12). From there, she deftly combines theoretical analysis with close readings of practical jokes compiled in her research. The middle section of the book explores practical joking's relationship with truth and morality. Her discussion of humor support and her employment of the conceptual framing of "unlaughter" are particularly rewarding. The book's final chapters examine practical jokes in the context of their specific social settings. The conclusion then ponders their meaning to the broader social order.

Marsh's analysis is at its most commanding when she burrows deep into thick descriptions of her selected practical jokes, their participants, and their settings. The sentence, "Chickens seem to be inherently funny, and the reason they are is that we care about them, but we do not care too much" (p. 77) alone makes *Practically Joking* worth reading. Also of note is the section at the end of chapter 9 on the gender dynamics of practical joking. More broadly, two chapters stand out as especially compelling. Chapter 3, "The Great Drug Bust: Morphology of an April Fools' Joke," plays to her strengths, interweaving theoretical interpretation seamlessly with an in-depth deconstruction of one practical joke. Her discussion of the distinction between effective and successful practical jokes is particularly thoughtful. Chapter 6, "All Jokes Are Bad if They Are Any Good: Humor Support and Unlaughter," effectively discusses practical joking as a form in the context of humor theory and the history of play.

Of course, no work is without flaws, and this book's framing of its subject as a form of play offers one avenue of criticism. Marsh's classification of practical jokes as "unilateral play forms that attempt to compel their targets into play through surprise or trickery" seems to run contrary to the consensus among scholars of play "that play is voluntary and that players are aware they are playing."

While Marsh plainly concedes, "Compulsory, unilateral play is almost a contradiction in terms," she never quite satisfactorily explains away this incongruity beyond acknowledging that potential tricksters should keep their attempts playful (pp. 11, 17). She never quite resolves the inherent friction between the idea that consent is necessary for something to be considered play and the reality that non-consent is necessary to dupe a target into a practical joke.

A more significant flaw in Marsh's analysis is that, as deep as *Practically Joking* dives into the jokes themselves, Marsh casts her research net perhaps less widely than she should. If, as she persuasively argues, practical joking violates cultural norms and highlights social boundaries in ways that depend on specific regional and occupational settings, place would seem to be a major component of practical joke rituals. If this is so, why are her case studies chiefly taken from New Zealand and the United States? Marsh has painted herself into a conceptual corner. If their methods of practical joking unify these distinct cultures enough to justify examining them together, a more precise framing narrative for this approach would be useful. If, on the other hand, practical joking highlights distinctions between disparate places and

their respective populations, a more geographically and ethnically diverse data set would be helpful.

Likewise, Marsh's failure to acknowledge the African-American trickster tale tradition in a study that uses the term trickster to describe practical joke instigators is, at best, a curious omission. In citing the prevalence of trickster figures among various folklore traditions, she lists only Bugs Bunny and the Blues Brothers as American examples. In a work otherwise characterized by analytical precision, this is a particularly glaring misstep.

Such flaws notwithstanding, *Practically Joking* remains a substantial achievement that illuminates a previously understudied subject integral to the history of play and the study of humor. Where it succeeds, it succeeds exceptionally. The close readings of specific practical jokes interweave theory and praxis seamlessly. Where it falls short, it at least raises important questions that demand answers, providing fruitful opportunities for further exploration in subsequent studies. Those who seize these opportunities will owe a debt to Moira Marsh. *Practically Joking* will be an invaluable resource and an unavoidable reference point for anyone following in her footsteps.

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### **The High-Performing Preschool: Story Acting in Head Start Classrooms**

*Gillian Dowley McNamee*

Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago