

The research evidence is cited in an undigested manner in the notes section at the back of the book. Also, she uses terms in unfamiliar ways. For example, Densmore describes her approach as play therapy, but she does so without making any connections to the play therapy literature. This extensive literature on the subject would have been very useful, given that play therapy has always been devoted to children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties but not in the ways that Densmore uses this term in her own work. It would have been especially interesting for Densmore to compare her own work from a speech therapy perspective to the wider play-therapy literature. The field of play therapy continues to broaden, and it now includes a wider age range—from very young children to adults—and a variety of disabilities, such as autism. Therefore, it would have been useful to compare the advantages and disadvantages of working in playrooms to working in the natural environment with these children, to compare working individually to working in pairs, and to compare working from a speech and language perspective to working from a psychological perspective.

Even with these caveats, I did find this book enlightening. And obviously it generated a range of ideas and questions for me about how to work most effectively with children having more serious autistic difficulties. Densmore was able to draw on her lengthy, specialized clinical work and seemed very effective in helping these children, based on her own notes and thoughts in this area. Ultimately, of course, I hope Densmore's book generates more interest in action research, since it is very important to research which methods

and strategies work for which children and for which therapists most effectively.

—Virginia Ryan, *University of York, York, UK*

Stop Me if You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes

Jim Holt

New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2008. Photographs, illustrations, index. 160pp. \$15.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780393066739

But seriously, folks . . .

Stop Me if You've Heard This: A History and Philosophy of Jokes has broken into the top five hundred in Amazon's sales ranking. It deserves this popularity. Jim Holt is an engaging writer whose thoughtful reviews of works in science and philosophy appear in *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times*. For the past five years, he has also been writing the smart and smart-alecky "Egghead" column for the online magazine *Slate*. His latest book is more in that vein; the book is engaging, admirable for its serious ambitions to explain, and it is funny—fittingly so—often striking a tone of mock outrage over the dubious material he plainly revels in. (Authors who study humor are often strangely humorless.) Holt has an ear for the funniest enduring jokes. Even the index to this book, compiled by *The Atlantic's* Benjamin Healy, is funny. The book is timely, too. We sorely need a serious and probing treatment of jokes.

Holt, like others before him, finds that it isn't easy to take a serious line with jokes; to explain them is to deflate them. He leaves us with this worry in the book's last sentence. But to reveal why it would step on

his punch line. Holt knows why comedians don't bother to write about jokes even though they are the best qualified. He also shows us how the most qualified thinkers—philosophers—are probably the least fitted to tell us about humor. Of the few who have tried, Holt reminds us, Emanuel Kant preferred regaling his friends with complaints about constipation over telling them jokes. Hobbes and Schopenhauer only “hazarded somewhat elliptical theories,” and Henri Bergson—a “second-rater” if Holt ever read one—managed to write a full-length treatise about humor but boiled the comic down to slipping on a banana peel. Take those philosophers! *Please!* But we learn from Holt's philosophers three useful things: that we laugh because we feel superior to the butt of a joke—for Plato, folly and vice were fair game for jokes. That incongruity prompts us to laugh: horse walks into a bar and sits down; bartender says “Why the long face?” And that laughter is a release. “Laughter,” Kant observed, “is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.” And so—illustrating all three theories—we might laugh when the finicky butler who has hired the Three Stooges to fix the plumbing musses his dinner jacket after slipping on Curley's discarded banana peel. Or, if we've outgrown the Stooges, we might not. It is funny how humor goes stale.

Jokes become timeworn, but they also may be timeless. This timelessness, though, may make it impossible to tell a new joke. The oldest traceable joke genealogy Holt could find is a story—putting this politely—about choosing between sex and food that goes back all the way to a Byzantine-era joke compilation called the *Philogelos*. But Holt wants to have it the other way around too, claiming that in the ensuing Dark Ages people forgot how to

tell jokes. Not that early medieval people merely forgot how to write down their jokes, mind you, but that they actually forgot how to tell jokes. Jokes, he insists, are a product of bustling civilization: cities spawn jokes. And it is city people with time on their hands who create the jokes. Cosmopolitans like Holt (he divides his time between New York and Paris) always think country people are bumpkins and too dim to enjoy themselves. But if we can read jokes from antiquity and then read them again during the Renaissance, should we assume that medieval people spent the millennium between the day Rome fell and the day Petrarch climbed Mount Ventoux cowering from invading Vikings and wailing from the plague?

No, the Dark Age ox driver made fun of his old slow animal, his annoying in-laws, his in-laws' annoying in-laws, his wife's food, foreigners from the next village, the fat clergy, his anointed betters (in private), his neighbors' privates (in public), and himself. To assume otherwise is to assume that human nature took a holiday and that jokes perished when the barbarians killed all the Latin teachers. In fact, travelers who needed to break the ice carried jokes from place to place, and their audience, likely skewed younger by earlier mortality, likely also yielded more easily to the impulse to play. For a specific joke to survive, it needs to be retold continually over the centuries, even if for a time it goes unrecorded and leaves a gap in the records. But the impulse to play at telling jokes is universal. Hunter-gatherers who have never seen a skyscraper tell jokes and hurl jibes we can recognize as funny. And even our primate cousins, those chimpanzees who have been taught sign language, can wryly describe seltzer as fuzzy water or laugh a chimp laugh at their own chimp

joke when they insist to their keepers that a rock is food. Or as Henny Youngman might have put it, “The meal on the plane was fit for a king! Here, King!”

This hints at a very ancient history for jokes. For some, though, jokes start not just old but musty, reaching past Joe Miller and as far back as our collective unconscious. Sigmund Freud, an industrious collector of jokes himself and the most influential recent thinker who explained jokes, saw them chiefly as symptoms wafting from the bubbling id like an unpleasant odor. For Freud, jokes revealed the forbidden and the repressed, sex and violence, mainly, but jealousy and resentment, shame and guilt, too. Freud retold 139 jokes in his influential work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), and he quoted both the funny and the tedious to draw out their meanings. Not much for timing or phrasing, Freud was “no Henny Youngman,” Holt concludes. With the help of Elliot Oring who wrote *The Jokes of Sigmund Freud* (1984), Holt turns the tables on the founder of psychoanalysis, casting his joke hoarding as a species of anal fixation. Whatever Freud’s small joke collection represents, it is dwarfed by the stupendous record that Holt’s favorite subject, Gershon Legman amassed. Legman, an American lay analyst and a self-trained expatriate Freudian folklorist manqué, a bibliographer for the sexologist Alfred Kinsey, amassed some sixty thousand jokes. To Legman, these jokes traced an unremitting stream of anxiety, repression, neurosis, and compulsion, and this made his lifelong enterprise funny, but not funny *ha-ha*. In Legman’s tendentious reading, jokes revealed “infinite aggressions,” and dirty jokes were a variety of rape.

Holt admits that reading Legman’s scatological material felt like being trapped

“in the men’s room of a Greyhound bus station in the 1950s,” and he acknowledges that the experience was “punishing.” Compiling these jokes, Legman must surely have felt even more sorely beset. But the weight of these gags kept Legman from remembering that no nonprofessional joke teller can tell sixty thousand jokes and that no human beforehand could have smelled the stale mass he kept in his many file boxes. By looking for mirth and finding only filth, Legman revealed his own compulsions and traced from his soured view the outlines of his own spiritual autobiography.

Freud cast a shadow over other joke collectors, too, notably Allen Dundes, a folklorist at the University of California at Berkeley. Even the sunniest of joke collectors, Nat Schmulowitz—a Hollywood lawyer who defended Fatty Arbuckle—is introduced so we may learn that the librarian who keeps Schmulowitz’s archive now frequently receives requests for literature about flagellation. The collectors miss, and Holt minimizes, that jokes above all are punctuations, momentary transgressions, playful interruptions that sustain us and keep us fresh in the face of the unrelenting ordinary. Jokes are fun; if they’re something else—even when they’re naughty or nasty—they are not jokes. We keep the world at bay and secure our place in it by amusing ourselves with irony, non sequiturs, puns, quips, double entendres, wisecracks, satires, send-ups, deliberate misreadings, ballads with a punch line, nonsense rhymes, and riddles. But all this is sociable mischief, not perversion. That’s no lady, buster, that’s my wife!

We should not confuse Holt’s agreeable if slender gloss with the book about jokes that we need; a history and a philosophy this isn’t. Rather, *Stop Me if You’ve Heard This* sketches a few dour philosophers who

deigned to think about jokes and profiles some oddball joke collectors. Still, especially because we have so little in the way of history and philosophy of jokes, and since jokes deserve explanation as the shortest and most popular of the short stories that we circulate in our everyday encounters, for people interested in play, this book isn't a bad place to start. One of Holt's offhand remarks—that jokes serve no obvious evolutionary end—points the way toward explaining jokes without deflating them. In fact, we are beginning to learn of the important part that jokes, and play itself, has served in our biosocial evolution. Edward de Bono has explored the brain as a pattern-making and pattern-recognizing machine that allows us to laugh at jokes. Marvin Minsky helps us understand why understanding the “paradoxical nonsense” at the heart of jokes can help protect us. Robert Provine has investigated contagious laughter. And Jaak Panksepp has taken us back to the very beginning of mammalian laughter with his studies of laughing rats. *Bada-bing*. We are on the brink of learning why we can laugh.

—Scott G. Eberle, *Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY*

Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport

Michael A. Messner

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In *Out of Play*, Michael Messner tells a fascinating story about the gender dynamics at play in late twentieth-century organized

sports. His collected essays, all previously published articles spanning the years 1988 to 2006, address the serious ramifications of play in the arena of highly competitive sports. Written in clear compelling prose, Messner's eleven chapters range in subject from children's soccer leagues to high-school athletics and professional sport. The brilliance of Messner's volume lies in its ability to combine analysis of materially based institutional structures and media-based representations that together project the gender ideologies that at any given moment help constitute the world of sports. Moreover, Messner's macroanalysis is paired with sensitive interpretations of the many meanings of sport for individuals, whether as young athletes, seasoned professionals, or armchair spectators.

The book's four sections encompass the topical and theoretical range of Messner's last two decades of work. Part 1, “Sport as a Gender Construction Site,” argues that sport has long been a realm that excludes or marginalizes women while creating dominant codes of masculinity that radiate beyond the athletic world. Given the salience of gender in sport, masculinity and femininity are never stable categories, so that sport remains a site in which gender ideologies are always contested. “Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender” illustrates how this process of gender construction starts from the very first time children step on the playing field. Messner tells a story of observing opening-day ceremonies for a youth soccer league with separate boys' and girls' leagues. In the day's parade, a team of four- and five-year-olds called the Barbie Girls was situated next to a team of four- and five-year-old boys named the Sea Monsters, and havoc followed. The girls started singing a Barbie song, prompting the boys to chant