

# The Humorous Times

Newsletter of the International Society for Humor Studies

Summer 2014

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## Association News

### 2014 Conference of the International Society for Humor Studies

From Sibe Doosje, 2014 ISHS Conference Convener

The 26th conference of the International Society for Humor Studies was held at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands from July 7 to July 11. The conference was a true joy to host along with Jeffrey Goldstein and Giseline Kuipers. We welcomed 133 participants from many countries, and we had a most enjoyable time together. Preparing for the conference, I had the sense that I was throwing a party for my friends. And a true party it was! The weather was not cooperating the first half of the week but by Thursday and Friday we had beautiful sunny days.



The University of Utrecht provided its historic University Hall as the Conference's main venue. In addition to pre-conference tutorials, symposia and great paper presentations, the Mayor of Utrecht, Jan van Zanen, received the conference delegates at City Hall, and the Utrecht city carillonist, Malgosia Fiebig, played in honor of the conference humorous tunes on the bells of the city's famous Dom tower. Jennifer Hofmann received the Don and Alleen Nilsen Young Scholars Award for her paper, *The Perception of Facial Features of Intense Laughter in Animations*. Three additional students received Graduate Students Awards for their work: Tristan Miller for *Towards the Automatic Detection and Identification of English Puns*, Dick Zijp for *Comedy, Theatricality, and the Naked Self: Towards a Reconceptualization of Dutch Cabaret and Transnational Stand-Up Comedy*, and Sarah Seewoester Cain for *When Comedians Laugh: Laughter as a Signal for Meta-Communicative Shifts in Monologue Performances*.



ISHS President Larry Ventis congratulates Victor Raskin on receiving the ISHS Lifetime Achievement Award

At the Society's annual membership meeting at the conclusion of the conference, we remembered Lorene Birden and Bill Fry, longtime ISHS members, who passed away in 2014. The ISHS Board also gave a Lifetime Achievement Award to Victor Raskin for his service and scholarly work in humor studies.

### In This Issue

Association News .....	1
• 2014 ISHS Conference	
• 2014 Graduate Student Awards	
Upcoming Events .....	2
• 2014 Conference on Clowning	
• 2014 ISLHHS Conference	
• Comedy and Society Symposium	
Book Reviews .....	3
• Philosophy of Humor	
• Humour: A Very Short Introduction	
• No Joke: Making Jewish Humor	
• The Secret Ways of Women's Humor	
• Smiles are Everywhere	
• Structural Ambiguity in English	
Recent Publications .....	10
• Encyclopedia of Humor Studies	
• Recent Articles	
In Remembrance .....	13
• William Fry	

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### Next Issue

The next *Humorous Times* is due in November 2014. Items for the November issue should be sent to [ishs@hnu.edu](mailto:ishs@hnu.edu).

## **2014 Conference Reflections**

Our organizational committee's aim was to impress everyone with the conference and its venue. We believe that we succeeded. Of course the proof lies in the comments from Conference delegates. Many people responded positively, and the following are just a sample.

*Thank you for your many great kindnesses during my stay in your beautiful city. The conference was fantastic . -- Don Baird*

*My thanks to you and to Jeffrey and Giselinde for a most enjoyable conference in Utrecht. Good papers, good colleagues, good chances to meet new scholars and to greet old friends - just how it should be, just what a conference is for. -- Christie Davies*

*The pleasure of having been in Utrecht at the conference that you so marvelously managed was so great that I'm still under the influence. – Liisi Laineste*



The next ISHS Conference will be in Oakland, and I have all the confidence that Martin Lampert will manage this one in an excellent way. Also, I would like to point out to you that Laura Vagnoli, one of the 2014 participants (see photo, she is sitting on the back of Sibes bike), is organizing the *First International Conference on Pediatric Hospital Clowning* in Florence, Italy on October 17 and 18. Hopefully we will meet once again on one of these occasions.

## **2015 International Society for Humor Studies Conference**

***Holy Names University, Oakland, California, June 29 – 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 in Oakland, California—the Society's home base. ISHS Executive Secretary, Martin Lampert, will convene the 2015 Conference.

Conference activities will begin on Monday, June 29, with pre-conference activities, the first of five plenary sessions, and a special roundtable on humor in animation art. Tuesday, June 30 through Friday, July 3 will be full conference days with symposia, workshops, and paper sessions. Eleven humor studies associations from around the globe will hold invited symposia, and the conference will host a one-act comedy competition across the first four evenings. Registration, program, and accommodation information will become available on Society's website at [www.humorstudies.org](http://www.humorstudies.org) in November 2014. Inquiries can be sent to the Conference convener, Martin Lampert at [ishs@hnu.edu](mailto:ishs@hnu.edu)

## **Upcoming Events**

### **2014 Conference of the Society for Luso-Hispanic Humor Studies**

***University of Hawaii, Manoa, USA. October 16–17, 2014***

The International Society for Luso-Hispanic Humor Studies will hold its 15th Annual Conference on the campus of the University of Hawaii at Manoa. This year's keynote speaker will be playwright Luis Valdez, playwright and artistic director of El Teatro Campesino. For more Conference and Society information, contact the Conference organizers, Lucia Aranda and Jim Yoshioka, at [humor14@hawaii.edu](mailto:humor14@hawaii.edu).

### **First International Conference on Pediatric Hospital Clowning**

***Meyer Children's Hospital of Florence, Italy, October 17-18, 2014***

This conference aims to create an opportunity for the presentation and discussion amongst Hospital Clowning researchers and trainers regarding data and reflections on the clowns' work in pediatric settings. Inquiries about the Conference program can be sent to Laura Vagnoli at [l.vagnoli@meyer.it](mailto:l.vagnoli@meyer.it).

### **Comedy and Society Symposium**

***University of Hull, United Kingdom, November 22, 2014***

Bringing together scholars from several disciplines, this symposium aims to encourage a wide-ranging consideration of the contribution made to society by comedy in all its forms. Inquiries about this symposium can be sent to Dr. Louise Peacock, at [l.s.peacock@hull.ac.uk](mailto:l.s.peacock@hull.ac.uk).

## Twenty-First AHSN Colloquium

*Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities*  
*Adelaide, South Australia, February 4-6, 2015*

The 21st Colloquium of the Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN) will be held from February 4 to 6, 2015 at the Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities in Adelaide, South Australia. The conveners are Christine Nicholls, Robert Phiddian, Colette Mrowa-Hopkins, and Antonella Strambi. The conference theme will be Humour: Politics, Pragmatics, Ethics. For more information, contact Dr. Christine Nicholls at [christine.nicholls@flinders.edu.au](mailto:christine.nicholls@flinders.edu.au) or visit the AHSN website at <http://www.sydney.edu.au/humourstudies>.

## Forty-First 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](mailto:playconference2015@ollusa.edu) or visit the TASP website at [www.tasplay.org/about-us/conference](http://www.tasplay.org/about-us/conference).

## Twenty-Eighth 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>.

## Book Reviews

### The Philosophy of Humor

*From Steffen Steinert, Research Center for Neurophilosophy and Ethics of Neuroscience,  
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München*

**Paul McDonald. (2013). *The Philosophy of Humour*. Philosophy Insights Series (Gen. Ed., Mark Addis, Birmingham City University). Tirril Hall, Penrith UK: Humanities-Ebooks LLP. 135 pp. Cloth: £11.75/EUR 14.79, ISBN 978-1-847-60211-4; E-book: £3.99/EUR 3.98, ISBN 978-1-847-60212-1.**

Among the books that introduce the philosophy of humor to newcomers, *The Philosophy of Humour*, by comic novelist and teacher of creative writing Paul McDonald, stands out for its accessibility as well as for practice elements to keep readers mentally busy. The slim introduction covers all the topics that readers unfamiliar with the philosophy of humor need to know to navigate the field successfully: he addresses the evolutionary beginnings and functions of amusement and humor and canvasses traditional theories ranging from ancient Greek accounts of humor to Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory. McDonald also offers a synopsis of positive and negative ethical aspects of humor. However, he omits distinctions that others may believe to be crucial, like the intricate differences between concepts such as comic ethicism, comic immoralism and comic moralism. However, given that the book is intended for novices, these omissions do not weigh too heavily.

Besides this expected overview of philosophical theories and ethics, the book also deals with the relationship between humor and religion. Readers learn about Christianity's strained relationship with laughter because of the connection to pleasure and thus an alleged connection with sin. They also learn that the fundamental relation between humor and religion is nowhere more visible than in Jewish humor because the view that "life is baffling and that there are no simple answers" (p. 98) is so engrained in the Jewish tradition. It is worth mentioning that McDonald also includes the relationship of humor with Buddhism.

Buddhist monks are required to show humility and should not put themselves above others. Because of their supposed link to superiority, laughter and humor were discouraged in early Indian Buddhism, but with the emergence of Zen Buddhism in China during the 6th century, the connection to superiority was dropped and “the serene, but essentially humorless image of the Indian Buddha is replaced by the corpulent Chinese laughing Buddha” (p. 101). The reason for the importance of humor in Zen Buddhism (similar to Judaism) is that in humor we pay attention to incongruities in life. Humor supports disciples in the quest to reach enlightenment by breaking thought patterns and questioning rational thought which opens their minds to counterintuitive truths. Today, humor even forms part of the education of young Zen monks in which laughter and the mockery of authorities play an important role.

*The Philosophy of Humour* features a chapter on postmodernism and humor, a topic not included in many introductions. Both are skeptical about certainty and reluctant to accept authority. McDonald introduces postmodernism via authors like Umberto Eco, Lance Olsen and John A. McClure, and suggests that humor in postmodern texts can close the gap between high art and pop culture. Humor and philosophy both question daily experience and take new perspectives on familiar things through reflection and detachment. I believe that even better-versed readers will find this chapter interesting.

McDonald’s presentation of various theories and positions is swift but he gives readers a solid background and a feel for the kind of problems at stake. He also refrains from articulating his personal opinions, nor does he give a simple, straight-forward critique of positions and theories. Instead, he uses representative or controversial positions that prompt readers to think about the issues for themselves.

The book has “pause and reflect” sections before each chapter to make readers pick their brains about upcoming themes. This results in much more active engagement with the content. In addition, the book contains creative writing exercises, in which readers are asked to translate the abstract ideas that they encountered in a chapter into a humorous story, dialogue or joke. After all, people remember things best when they apply it to a wider context and these teaching devices show that McDonald is sensitive to the needs of his intended audience of newcomers to the subject.

Since newcomers may have a few other books they might want to grab from the shelves to get started, I will briefly evaluate McDonald’s in comparison with its peers. Compared to Noël Carroll’s recent *Humor: A very short introduction* (2014) and Simon Critchley’s *On Humour* (2002), McDonald’s book is very similar in length and scope. What distinguishes McDonald’s book is its high readability and interactive elements. In contrast to Critchley, who is sometimes hard to grasp for the uninitiated reader, McDonald is easy to follow and no background philosophical knowledge is required. Because McDonald does not cover more recent topics like the connection between humor and cognition, readers interested in these themes and the intricacies of debates may prefer Carroll’s introductory book. The biggest advantage of *The Philosophy of Humour* over its peers is that it does not simply present positions but stimulates readers to think philosophically and creatively about them. The annotated bibliography and online resources given in an appendix as well as the PDF version (which has been optimized for use on PC and tablets) make the book especially valuable for academic uses.

In sum, McDonald’s book can be recommended to those looking for a highly readable first overview of philosophical inquiry into humor that enables them to think actively about the topics at hand. It will assist readers to acquire a decent body of knowledge about the philosophy of humor and will also help unlock their own creative and philosophical potential.

## **Humor: A Very Short Introduction**

*From James Nixon, University of Glasgow*

**Carroll, Noël. (2014). *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 128 pp. £7.99; ISBN 978-0-19-955222-1.**

Noël Carroll, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Temple University, has provided in this “very short introduction to humour” an overview of the leading theories of humour, the relationship between emotion and cognition, and the values and morality within various forms of humour. Balancing an easy and accessible writing style with a light academic analysis, his text makes a strong contribution to contemporary humour research by outlining the dominant theories, themes and issues surrounding the study of humour.

Although it will doubtlessly appeal to academics, it may be less accessible to the lay person. However its contribution to humour research is to provide an interesting compendium of the form's historical, theoretical, emotional and social qualities.

The book's initial section provides a concise overview of the five dominant theories of humour, their history and development, and their various strengths and weaknesses. Carroll's in depth analysis in this first chapter requires a certain amount of prior understanding of the various theories from the reader, as at times the text delves deeply into theoretical detail. Although at times it can be rather dry, the historical references help to make it more interesting and readable. Citing a range of examples such as Aristotle's classical development of the superiority theory, to British comedian Rowan Atkinson's contemporary role as an incongruity theorist, Carroll uses the extensive lineage of humour theory to illustrate the complexities involved in any analysis of humour (7, 24). This is complemented by his inclusion of a number of jokes—each serving respectively to illustrate his theoretical arguments. Skilfully blending historical and cultural elements into his overviews of humour theory, Carroll makes it clear that he wishes to make his compilation accessible to a larger readership than just those interested in humour research, and does so for the most part whilst maintaining an in-depth evaluation. Additionally, although Carroll makes it clear that his primary focus is on the incongruity theory, his treatment of alternative theories is well-balanced, giving equal space to history, reinforcement and criticism.

Carroll continues in the next chapter with an examination of comic amusement's role as an emotional state, its relation to the incongruity theory, and humour's role in dictating everyday behaviour (55). Whilst his analysis of emotion raises significant questions about humour's heuristic value, other parts of the chapter feel rather misplaced. His analyses of satire's influence on mobilising political action and the devaluing effects of comic amusement seem more suited to his final section on humour's relationship to value (60, 63-4). Placing them within the context of humour's relation to emotion, though not entirely inappropriate, makes this chapter slightly weaker than the other two.

The final chapter examines humour's relationship towards value. In his opening segment, he illustrates the role of humour as a form of social corrective, what Carroll notes as “a form of cognitive hygiene” that reinforces norms (79). In much the same way that he previously illustrated humour's ability to make us critically revise concepts and values, he recognizes here that it also serves to reinforce norms and assumes a conservative function (85). The last section examines the role of humour and morality, and prominent arguments for and against humour's role as a moral or immoral cultural agent. In his study of the attitude endorsement theory (the position that being comically amused by immoral humour shows in itself an endorsement of immoral attitudes), Carroll deftly undermines the central argument of this model by illustrating the ambiguities of intention and interpretation within humour, particularly within satire and dark humour. (92, 100, 111) Citing as illustrations examples such as Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle and the character of Al Bundy in the American sitcom series *Married with Children*, Carroll argues that frameworks such as the attitude endorsement theory fail to accommodate these complexities by imposing invariant presuppositions within humour (103-4).

In the contemporary context where humour is becoming more and more involved in social, moral and ethical quandaries, Carroll's final chapter provides a refreshing counter-argument to popular criticisms about humour's immoral stance. However, he does caution in his concluding remarks that perhaps because of the ambiguous nature of intention and interpretation within humour, it may be best to refrain from indulging in such humour, “insofar as we cannot be sure whether we are actually stoking hatred or, at least, insensitivity” (117). This cautionary conclusion typifies Carroll's restraint throughout his text, where, although he illuminates the various issues and topics within humour, he is cautious about introducing too much personal opinion, recognising the danger of being too dogmatic in a discipline that evades concrete definitions and characterizations. A rare occasion when he does intervene is for example his concluding sentence, ending the text with a humorous word of warning: “sometimes silence is the best policy” (117).

Carroll is clearly aware of the mammoth task of examining every facet of humour theory within the limitations of this book series' brief overview. He sees the aim of this book as being to articulate, rather than to expand popular theories, topics and issues of humour. This is certainly no weakness; rather, Carroll's broad presentation of the theoretical, historical, social and emotional facets of humour—all within the space of 120 pages—illustrates his skill as a theorist and writer. His layering of each argument with

intelligent historical, theoretical and cultural references, his peppering of relevant jokes and humorous anecdotes throughout the text, and his occasional (often very amusing) interjections within the body of the text, all display Carroll's skill as a writer, and his ability to present complex ideas and theories eloquently. *A Very Short Introduction to Humour* will likely prove a popular text in contemporary humour scholarship, and for both the academic and the casual reader, it provides a useful resource on the foundations of humour theory.

## **No Joke, Making Jewish Humor**

*From Christie Davies, Sociology Department, University of Reading, United Kingdom*

**Ruth R. Wisse (2013). *No Joke, Making Jewish Humor*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press. 279 pp. USD 24.95; £16.95.**

No higher praise can be given Ruth Wisse's book than to say that it is 'under-theorised'. There is no high falutin' jargon in it and she writes in the clear, down to earth way that has characterised her many other writings. Dr. Wisse does what every writer about comparative literature ought to do. She provides the great mass of English speaking readers who lack a knowledge of the Yiddish, German and Hebrew languages with summaries of and insights into the most important works of Jewish humor in those languages. What more could one ask?

Most readers will not have previously seen either Herzl or Kafka as Jewish humorists writing in German. Yet Herzl began by using satire to further Zionist ideals. Kafka invented a captured ape forced to take on human ways as a metaphor for assimilation. Heine is given the longest analysis in the section on Jewish contributions to German literature. Heine could see the humorous possibilities of religion seen as a social commodity. He saw in this use of religion and in the posings of the gay German poet Graf Platen, laughable games of hide and seek, of the putting on and pulling off of social masks and of the identifying, exposing and ridiculing of those who do so. This is of course a very familiar source of humor of many kinds, particularly farce.

The section on the Yiddish humor of Eastern Europe is particularly instructive and especially the way in which its very varied versions are related to different cultural and religious backgrounds, such as Haskalah (Enlightenment) satire, Hassidic humor and the rabbinical wit of the Misdagnim. Space is also given to the obscene jokes told in Yiddish by Jewish men and the imaginative invective in that language of Jewish women. How very different from the decorous, restrained, respectable Jews of our own time. The Yiddish theater, the writings of Sholem Aleichem and many other significant comic authors less well known to the wider world are also covered in detail.

There are also interesting sections on 'Humor under Hitler and Stalin' and Israeli humor.

However, when it comes to the 'Anglosphere', Dr Wisse runs into problems. Although she has a very thorough knowledge and understanding of humorous writing by Jewish authors in English (though oddly omitting Disraeli and Nathanael West), like all too many literary experts, she infers the nature and history of the societies in which this literature was created either from what the authors have written or from comments on their work by critics. To proceed to use these inferences to account for these humorous works is very close to being circular. The paucity of the end notes to this section of the book indicates that she has not checked out the validity of the social and historical assertions she has made in the text.

In commenting on the English humorist Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*, which deals with the hostility a fictitious Jew experiences at the hands of contemporary anti-Israel activists, sliding as they often do into anti-Semitism, she declares that such views must be very widespread in Britain. It ain't so. Her idea of evidence is to cite a single case of attempted boycott, one involving a visiting Israeli theater group. It all shows, she says "the recycled anti-Jewish prejudice of a faded aristocracy and democracy's recourse to a convenient scapegoat". Complete nonsense! I have no doubt I could invent an equally good sociological case against Americans in general for having in their midst the Israel-boycotting American Studies Association, but what would it signify? She would have done better to note that Howard Jacobson writes regularly for a newspaper of the far Left, *The Independent*, whose nickname is *The Indescribably boring*. There he would regularly have encountered this kind of hostility and no doubt it influenced the writing of *The Finkler Question*. However, *The Independent* has a daily circulation of

about 70,000 and falling, and its cranky readers are not in any sense an elite. A similar point may be made about her analysis of why there was no angry Christian response to the mockery of the very core of their religion in Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, though uttered by the Jewish hero of a Jewish book by a Jewish author. She seems not to see that the Christians of America are not a single unit. Sophisticated Episcopalians or Presbyterians or Jesuits would simply have laughed at Roth's mockeries. Southern fundamentalists or those Catholics educated by the Christian Brothers would have been offended but they probably did not know of the book's existence. No doubt Roth has in preparation a humorous treatment of Mohammed and there will be a different kind of response.

The other error scholars in the humanities make is to take single jokes and to treat them as if they were literary texts about whose meaning critics can wrangle. Jokes are a different kind of phenomena. You can analyse the scripts of a related set of jokes but the meaning of a particular joke changes from telling to telling and is created on the spot. It is inaccessible. Taking this perspective also explains why literary critics, including Wisse, are still citing Freud long after he has been utterly discredited as a scientist. Her comments on individual Jewish jokes are best passed over in silence. I do not blame her for this. It is not a personal blindness but rather the blindness of her profession.

This is a valuable and insightful book about the wonderful humor of the world's, in all senses of the word, funniest people.

## **The Secret Ways of Women's Humour**

*From Christelle Paré, Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique,  
Urbanisation Culture Société, Montréal, Canada*

**Lucie Joubert and Brigitte Fontille, eds. (2012, December). Les voies secrètes de l'humour des femmes (The secret ways of women's humour). *Recherches Féministes (Feminist Research)*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 1-172. Groupe de recherche multidisciplinaire féministe (GREMF): Quebec City, Canada.**

Available from Eruudit with subscription at <http://www.erudit.org/revue/rf/2012/v25/n2/index.html>.

Journal subscription for 12 months is \$CAN 45 in Canada and \$CAN 60 Internationally from [http://www.recherchesfeministes.ulaval.ca/abonnement\\_a\\_la\\_revue/](http://www.recherchesfeministes.ulaval.ca/abonnement_a_la_revue/)

An academic colleague of mine, a convinced feminist, recently shared these thoughts with me: "Why should we always identify women doing comedy as 'comedian women'? Can't they just be *comedians*?"; "Why should we confine women to 'feminine' topics in humor? Shouldn't they be able and free to say what they want and how they want to say it?"; "Why do some comedian women feel the need to use vulgarity and try to shock as their male counterparts do? They don't need to lower themselves to that level." Such comments can leave anyone uncomfortable, uneasy, sitting on the fence ... Without answering all the complexity of the relationship between women and humor, the special issue of *Recherches Féministes, Secret Ways of Women's Humor*, published in 2012 under the direction of Lucie Joubert and Brigitte Fontille, tackles many of these issues.

Such an exercise was much needed, as it is true that the Francophone universe has granted little attention to the relationship between women and humor. In the introduction, the diagnosis of Joubert and Fontille is irrevocable: women "are conspicuous by their absence in the many brilliant anthologies or scholarly works devoted to humor and its avatars" [free translation from the French] and "almost never serve as universal references" (2012: 1). The evidence of this shortfall from the Francophone world of science is virtually indisputable and the overview provided by Joubert and Fontille, which also includes a few exceptions to this rule, is well supported and convincing. The almost brutal honesty delivered by the editors also focuses on the lateness of the Francophone world in this area, as the topic has already been the object of many publications in the Anglo-Saxon world, and these are increasing. The exercise behind this special issue is particularly relevant and interesting, especially since it is not confined strictly to research issues from Women's Studies, but provides multidisciplinary and original angles in both its approaches and analyses. The authors, all women, are from and teach in Canada, France, Switzerland and even Britain. They are sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, art historians, anthropologists, researchers from the world of media and communication, or literature. They are interested in prostitution (Pascale Absi), visual arts (Sara Savignac Rousseau), parodies of women's magazines (Lori Saint-Martin and Ariane Guibeau), comic books

(Ylva Lindberg, novels (Virginia Sauzon), couples (Caroline Henchoz), humor on stage (Marie Quévieux) and on television (Nelly Quemener), and in the clown (Delphine Cézard).

The articles are particularly well supported with state-of-the-art argumentations and demonstrations, to the point that it is not absolutely necessary to have a Women's Studies background to assess the content. For neophytes in Francophone research, it is important to know that *Recherches Féministes* is a Francophone journal with a peer review process and an international advisory committee. It is published by the Groupe de Recherche Multidisciplinaire Féministe (GREMF), at Université Laval in Quebec City, Canada. The rigor of the journal and its desire to present original research and findings allow *Recherches Féministes* to enjoy an excellent reputation in the Francophone scientific world. The articles in this issue certainly contribute to this renowned reputation.

This is a tour de force, to gather in a single project researchers of very different backgrounds in a feminist journal, and it shows the broad relevance of research linking humor and women. It also goes further by involving and reanalyzing authors of repute and their humor theories, but unfortunately does this a little too lightly, such as with Henri Bergson and Mikhaïl Bakhtin. It also addresses basic concepts in studies of humor, such as the grotesque, the carnivalesque, vulgarity, irony, discourse, and public space.

This exercise also helps novice readers in the field to identify and become familiar with key authors when it comes to the relationship between humor and women, such as Judith Butler and Kathleen Rowe, while introducing us to contemporary Francophone researchers of growing influence such as Lucie Joubert herself and Nelly Quemener. Of course, one can be critical in some way about each and every article (and I was), based on one's personal position and academic background; but mostly the work and seriousness requisite for the task are indeed present. Sadly, one cannot ignore the fact that some contributions rely too heavily on Francophone European references. Without judging their relevance, one may wish that their views had reached out to a larger range of possibilities. Is this restriction really related to a lack of similar work elsewhere in the world? If this special issue of *Recherches Féministes* wanted to correct a lack of visibility for Francophone scientific studies, it should not have overlooked the Anglophone world of research (or any other language of publication for that matter) while doing so.

Several areas of analysis emerge from these articles. A principal one discusses women's humor from a post-colonial perspective, especially with Lindberg and Quévieux, a difficult task with distinctly appreciable results. Then, there is the question of blurred lines: blurred borders, genres, methods, between reality and fiction, character and comedian. These notions are at the heart of Quemener, Lindberg and Savignac Rousseau's articles. Legitimizing the humorous feminine role (Cézard and Lindberg) is also discussed, as is the use of humor as a weapon or as a barrier, in the relationship with the male gender (Quemener, Henchoz, Absi and Sauzon). On several occasions, implicitly, one notes a criticism of the "traditional" feminist positions, but this, without being at the heart of the text, is actually more present in the articles by Saint-Martin and Gibeau. It seems that more should have been said in order to really explore these criticisms -- or why mention them in the first place?

In sum, however, Lucie Joubert and Brigitte Fontille have achieved a real exploit. In this issue they were hoping to highlight Francophone studies on women and humor, while presenting irrefutable proof that women *have* humor. In these aims they have been quite successful, and without considering this issue to be a complete anthology of Francophone research on the subject, and certainly not as a global representation of what is being done on the matter, the volume helps initiate the debate, tackles several angles, and provides tools for future research. Hopefully this contribution will not be the last word on the subject.

## **Smiles are Everywhere: Integrating Clown-Play into Healthcare Practices**

*From W. Larry Ventis, Psychology Department, College of William and Mary, Virginia, USA*

**Bernie Warren and Peter Spitzer. (2014). *Smiles are Everywhere: Integrating Clown-Play into Healthcare Practice*. New York, NY: Routledge. 125 pp. USD 40.96; ISBN 978-0-415-50514-7.**

The authors of *Smiles are Everywhere* report extensive experience with healthcare clown-play in a variety of settings, for diversion, stress reduction and entertainment with a broad range of patients, from children to the elderly. They have also conducted workshops for healthcare personnel with goals of simple team

building and/or to enable them to use humor themselves in their work, whether or not they choose to adopt a clown persona. The authors' respective full time professions (Bernie Warren is a professor in a School for Dramatic Art at the University of Windsor, and Peter Spitzer is a physician) combine to make for extensive knowledge of the uses and potential abuses of clown-play in medical settings.

The book is relatively light on specific supportive research for the effectiveness of clown play in healthcare settings; however they do cite relevant findings. There does not appear to be an extensive literature on the role of clowning in medical settings, so this is hardly a weakness of the present work. The authors do offer a cursory tour of research addressing the possible uses and effects of humor and play on mental and physical health variables, and they provide a plausible integration of modern clown-play in medical settings with historical antecedents, such as medieval fools and jesters.

Clearly, however, the heart of the book consists in a list of over 50 suggested clown-play activities for use in healthcare settings. Many of the activities appear best suited for small group interaction. The listings include humorous props, games, music, and magic tricks, and in each case the authors list potential benefits as well as possible risks and limitations. Potential benefits of many of the activities include such things as communication skills, imagination, building of rapport, stress reduction, and enhanced sensitivity to others feelings and concerns. The stating of potential risks can be quite useful in that in implementing playful activities the practitioner may be unlikely to anticipate participant concerns such as a reluctance to be touched. Limitations listed are often a function of particular medical issues. For instance, some activities would have to be adapted for a participant in a wheelchair.

For an example of one prescribed game, in an activity labeled "Mirror Face", persons A and B stand facing each other. Person A makes a funny face, and Person B copies it as best they can. Then they switch roles and each takes a couple of turns creating and mirroring faces. This activity could be done either with one individual, including young children, or as an exercise in groups. Clearly such activities can be amusing, entertaining, and at the very least, provide a break from persistent health concerns. One informative inclusion in the book is the referencing of Youtube videos for more detailed modeling and instruction in magic tricks that are described. Their book should be a potent weapon in countering the pervasive disorder which they describe in their preface, "Acquired Amusement Deficiency Syndrome (AADS)". Those who might find the book most useful would be people who are already involved in clown-play in healthcare settings and would like to enhance their repertoire. *Smiles are Everywhere* could also be quite beneficial to healthcare workers who have no intention of adopting a clown persona, but who might like to include occasional humor in their practice in a more deliberate manner, particularly in easing stress for children in medical settings.

## **Structural Ambiguity in English: An Applied Grammatical Inventory**

*From Salvatore Attardo, Texas A&M University–Commerce*

**Dallin D. Oaks. (2010). *Structural Ambiguity in English: An Applied Grammatical Inventory*. 2 vols. London: Continuum. 576 pp. cloth ed. USD 300.00, ISBN: 978-1-847-06415-8; paperback ed. (both vols.) USD 69.99, ISBN: 978-1-441-14045-6.**

Dallin Oaks, who is a professor at Brigham Young University, in Utah, has written the definitive treatment of structural ambiguity, i.e., ambiguity in which at least two different syntactic interpretations of a sentence, phrase, etc. are involved, to the exclusion, for example of lexical ambiguity, i.e., the case in which a word has more than one meaning, such as *bank* (credit institution, vs. feature of a river). He should be congratulated for this massive piece of descriptive scholarship.

Oaks' approach is systematic and hence largely exhaustive of the classes of phenomena in English, although, as he wisely acknowledges, not exhaustive of all ambiguities. He uses a fairly traditional theoretical apparatus, a move which will be welcomed by the non-linguists among his audience and by the linguists old enough to have wised up to the pointlessness of relabeling phenomena with the terminology *du jour*.

More significantly, his approach goes completely against the grain of linguistic studies of ambiguity phenomena, much to the benefit of humor scholars and others who may need to apply ambiguity, such as advertisers. Ambiguity in language, and correspondingly in linguistics, is something to get rid of, to eliminate for

the sake of communication. As Oaks notes, we have a word for "disambiguation" but no corresponding "ambiguation." Fact is, all words are ambiguous. For example, and to pick a very simple one, all nouns are ambiguous between a definite and indefinite reading (*a* book, or *the* book?) and a singular or plural reading (one book, or several?). Contextual pressure, such as the presence of an article or a plural morpheme, resolves these ambiguities (disambiguates the word). Oaks turns this perspective around and looks at those linguistic features that enable ambiguity to occur, which is of course what comedians and copywriters alike learn to do intuitively.

The book is organized in 18 chapters, mostly broken down by parts of speech: phonology, morphology, nouns, transitive verbs, other verbs, adjectives and adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, modifiers and modification, ellipsis and other reductions, questions and indirect reported speech, and fixed expressions.

The analysis pertains only to English, as the title correctly states. This is because "ambiguation" is a systematic phenomenon, i.e., it exists only against the background of a linguistic system: for example, consider the following restrictive/non-restrictive relative clause ambiguity:

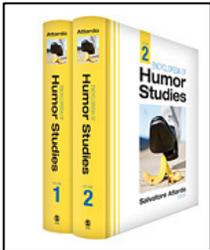
*Pilots, whose minds are dull, do not live long vs. Pilots whose minds are dull do not live long.*

The non-restrictive sense, with the commas, implies that pilots are dull and die young. The restrictive sense, more properly, implies that if a pilot's mind becomes dulled he/she may die. The point, of course, besides that flying planes can be dangerous, is that this ambiguity exists and can be exploited only in languages such as English, whose system allows this kind of ambiguity.

The book is heavily exemplified, with lots of examples coming from humor. Although I doubt many readers will read the book cover to cover, this is the kind of reference book any serious scholar should have in his/her library and that librarians should order. I have used it myself when preparing exercises for classes and when I needed a quick example of some specific ambiguity phenomenon.

## 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. USD 350.**

*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 May 2014. If you have a recent publication, let us know. We will include it in a future newsletter.

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## In Remembrance



### **William Finlay Fry, Jr.**

**March 25, 1924-May 16, 2014**

*From Arthur Asa Berger, Professor Emeritus, San Francisco State University*

William Fry was a psychiatrist, a notorious chimp tickler (he did research on chimpanzees and tickling), who was associated with Stanford University for many years, before he retired. While there he worked on a project with Gregory Bateson involving humor and this experience led Bill to write an important book about humor, *Sweet Madness: A Study of Humor* (1963) and, with Melanie Allen, *Make 'Em Laugh* (1975, reissued as *Creating Humor: Life Studies of Comedy Writers*, 1998), which had interviews with many comedy writers. He also wrote countless articles on humor and other topics that interested him. When his wife Betty, who died a few years ago, ran a newspaper, Bill was the wine critic.

Shortly after I started teaching at San Francisco State University, I got in touch with him and eventually we organized a humor study society, BAHA: the Bay Area Humor Association. We had meetings regularly at State for a few years or so. We had humor scholars from all of the universities in the area come to our meetings and had guest lecturers from the San Francisco comedy scene as well as academics give presentations. I can remember one workshop in which a comedy writer taught us how to manufacture gags. The gags, he said, were “valid,” even if they weren’t particularly funny. Another one involved a comedian spending an hour teaching us how comedians handle microphones. Bill also asked me to collaborate with him on some workshops on humor and health that we gave at medical schools and other places for doctors who wanted to get continuing education credit and found workshops on humor a pleasant way to do so. Once we also applied for a grant to study humor in Spain—though neither of us spoke—because Bill really wanted to spend some time there—at government expense, if possible. Our application was rejected eleven to zero by the government agency involved with research in Spain.

Bill was a kindly person who was generous with his time and managed to have interesting things to say about all kinds of different things. He often sent me copies of his articles. He once sent me something he wrote about mirrors, and as usual, he had interesting and offbeat things to say about them. He was also the world’s number one “slow eater,” before slow eating became popular in some foodie circles. He could sip a cup of tea for around an hour, since he would swish the tea around in his mouth after every sip. We used to meet for Dim Sum every once in a while and he could take twenty minutes to eat two shrimp balls. Bill Fry was a very sweet man who has made lasting contributions to the study of humor and had interesting things to say about everything he wrote about; he will be missed by all who knew him.

### ***A Special Invitation***

**Bill Fry was a longtime member of the International Society for Humor Studies, and he had many friends in the Society. We are grateful to Arthur Berger for his warm tribute to his friend and fellow humor scholar, and we invite other ISHS members to submit additional remembrances for Bill Fry, which we will publish in the Fall 2014 issue of the *Humorous Times*.**



***For more ISHS news, visit us on the web at  
[www.humorstudies.org](http://www.humorstudies.org).***