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No Joke: Making Jewish Humor (Library Of Jewish Ideas)



Synopsis

Humor is the most celebrated of all Jewish responses to modernity. In this book, Ruth Wisse evokes and applauds the genius of spontaneous Jewish joking--as well as the brilliance of comic masterworks by writers like Heinrich Heine, Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Babel, S. Y. Agnon, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Philip Roth. At the same time, Wisse draws attention to the precarious conditions that call Jewish humor into being--and the price it may exact from its practitioners and audience. Wisse broadly traces modern Jewish humor around the world, teasing out its implications as she explores memorable and telling examples from German, Yiddish, English, Russian, and Hebrew. Among other topics, the book looks at how Jewish humor channeled Jewish learning and wordsmanship into new avenues of creativity, brought relief to liberal non-Jews in repressive societies, and enriched popular culture in the United States. Even as it invites readers to consider the pleasures and profits of Jewish humor, the book asks difficult but fascinating questions: Can the excess and extreme self-ridicule of Jewish humor go too far and backfire in the process? And is "leave 'em laughing" the wisest motto for a people that others have intended to sweep off the stage of history?

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Customer Reviews

Ruth Wisse shares with her readers both the context and a map to better understand the diverse fountainheads of Jewish humor. Ms. Wisse defends the Eurocentrism of her examination of Jewish

humor by pointing out that Jews of Arab lands have not acquired a comparable reputation for Jewish humor. Furthermore, the author started her Eurocentric examination of Jewish humor with the controversial 19th-century Francophile Heinrich Heine. Ms. Wisse acknowledges that the roots of Jewish humor go as far back as the Bible and Talmud. Think for example about Genesis 18:12 and Ecclesiastes 3:4. Ms. Wisse nicely mixes her telling of Jewish comedy, satire, and irony with the cultural, political, and socio-economic context in which this humor (has) flourished. She explores Jewish humor in the German, Yiddish, British/American, Russian, and Hebrew spheres. Ms. Wisse rightly draws the attention of her readers to the importance of acceptance of levity among many Jews, reflecting on their eventful history. Humor thrives in an environment in which contrarities, suspense, and even insecurity are readily embraced. For this reason, some readers will feel at times uncomfortable with some Jewish humor that can be perceived as Anti-Semitic. In summary, Ms. Wisse provides her audience with a well-articulated roadmap to better grasp the genesis and development of Jewish humor across different geographies in the past two centuries.

Ruth Wisse is one of the great teachers and critics of Jewish and especially Yiddish Literature working today. She is a wide-ranging writer who has also analyzed persuasively Israel and the Jewish people's political difficulties. Here she describes the way Jewish humor has worked in different geographical and cultural areas through the past two centuries. Beginning with the Germany of Heine, and going to the Yiddish language world whose great star was Sholom Aleichem, she also describes the worlds of greatest oppression in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia and then the world of Anglo-Saxon British and American humor. She too has a chapter on the humor of a society some have stereotyped as humorless, Israel. She brings to the description and analysis formidable powers of observation and explanation. She helps us understand the humor appreciated by Freud and that of Kafka, Babel, Agnon, Philip Roth and others. She touches upon the intensity and self-critical quality of much Jewish humor as well as capacity for complexity, contradiction and irony. She shows that it is not just one thing, but varies in style tone with times and troubles. She too shows how it has been a remedy for the sufferings of the Jews, but warns too that the remedy may bear within it, when hypercritical a danger of its own. Throughout the work are interspersed Jewish jokes that give a special kind of pleasure in reading the work. Anyone who cares about things Jewish and anyone who cares about things humorous, and especially anyone who cares about both of these things will love this book. Enjoy.

This is clearly not a joke book although it does contain some very funny jokes. The jokes are not

free standing, but are there to demonstrate a particular point. Some of the points are very dark, like Jewish jokes about Nazi cruelty, as well as jokes referring to other persecutions. It also gives incites into many comedians and historical figures. I feel the book is important, and not simply an easy read.

A wonderful book. Read it and enjoy it and then do it again. Some of the jokes will be familiar, many will not. What will come as a surprise is how much of history will be reflected in these stories (and, yes, another name for jokes a very short well-written story with a twist at the end).

Written by an accomplished scholar perched among Harvard's prestigious faculty, this book proved disappointing. I benefitted from Prof. Wisse's discourse on Heine and his contemporaries. The rest, except for a novel foray into Israeli humor, lacked a compelling narrative. Too much attention is lavished on self-deprecation rather than the aggressive assaults, for example, of Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce. Given the rich literature that informs this protean subject, the author is parsimonious in her citations and limited, indeed ideosyncratic, in scope. I bought the book with great expectations only to discover that Jewish Humor, in this treatment is blessed with brevity but short on wit. Leo Rosten's "Joy of Jewish Humor" goes AWOL in this ambitious but underachieving book. Joe Dorinson

This is an academic study of Jewish Humor that delves into the nature of this wonderful form of ethnic humor. Although I haven't finished the book yet, I am impressed with the depth of the insights into the structure of Jewish humor and how it relates to the Eastern European Jewish culture. It is a must for students of this art form.

Prof. Weiss's narrative is very complete. This is a very serious book and is therefore aptly named "No Joke". I found the early chapters dealing with the "humor" leading up to the 20th century to be informative, but somewhat tedious, and at times difficult to follow. Sometimes, the irony of the "humor" escaped me as being humor. As the narrative progressed into the 20th century I found the read easier and more interesting, but perhaps that is because I could relate more to the humor and the culture and times that nurtured it.

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