



# American Cornball: A Laffopedic Guide to the Formerly Funny

By Christopher Miller

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*American Cornball* is Christopher Miller's irresistibly funny illustrated survey of popular humor—the topics that used to make us laugh, from hiccups and henpecked-husbands to outhouses and old maids—and what it tells us about our country yesterday and today.

Miller revisits nearly 200 comic staples that have been passed down through our culture for generations, many originating from the vaudeville age. He explores the (often unseemly) contexts from which they arose, why they were funny in their time, and why they eventually lost their appeal. The result is a kind of taxonomy of humor during America's golden age that provides a deeper, more profound look at the prejudices, preoccupations, and peculiarities of a nation polarized between urban and rural, black and white, highborn and lowbrow.

As he touches on issues of racism and sexism, cultural stereotypes and violence, Miller reveals how dramatically our moral sensibilities have shifted, most notably in the last few decades. Complete with more than 100 period illustrations, *American Cornball* is a richly entertaining survey of our shifting comic universe.

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## American Cornball: A Laffopedic Guide to the Formerly Funny By Christopher Miller Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #987022 in Books
- Published on: 2015-11-17
- Released on: 2015-11-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x 1.36" w x 5.31" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 544 pages

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### Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Humor is notoriously subjective. Miller's hefty abecedarian tome—from "Absentminded Professors" to "Zealots"—covers its rollicking butt (so to speak) from the start, claiming it's a guide to the "formerly funny," discussing "jokes that died out, peaked, or assumed a distinctive form in the early or mid-twentieth century." Coverage runs from less than a page (for "Get-Rich-Quick Schemes") to several pages (for "Flatulence"), and cross-referenced terms are set in boldface capital letters. The book happily sports more than 150 color and black-and-white illustrations, running from the vintage—cartoons, advertisements, novelty postcards—to the somewhat contemporary (e.g., a photo of TV's Gomer Pyle), and the healthy smattering of quotes from true wits will make readers smile. Miller's detailed thoroughness sometimes overwhelms, and he includes such un-PC topics as "Domestic Violence," "Drunks and Drunkenness," and "Rape" (bald men, black people, and fat folks also once got yuks). Even so, comedy-film buffs, cartoonists, and nostalgics may bite hard on this one. --Eloise Kinney

### Review

"A peculiar, enlightening book, an investigation of trivia, a strange history of American life from 1900 through 1966... It's a delight." (Elizabeth McCracken, *The Washington Post*)

"A clever, discursive, meticulously researched guide to explain all that old-fashioned humor of yesteryear...impressive survey of humor...an insightful study of the peculiar and contradictory beast that is the American psyche." (*Boston Globe*)

"Miller writes with the humor that benefits his myriad subjects, and though he says it could have had twice the number of entries (and tells us some in his afterword), consider his book exhaustive. This is the only laffopedia you will ever need." (*Columbus Dispatch*)

"A spectacular compendium...making inspired zigs and zags through ancient bits and gags, from Krapp's Last Tape to Andy Capp's shtick." (**Ben Greenman, author of *The Slippage* and *What He's Poised to Do***)

"Miller's lovingly jaundiced exploration of the way America once laughed crackles with insight; the result is that rare book on humor that is as entertaining as its subject." (**Publishers Weekly**)

"If you yuck and guffaw at the likes of old maids, absent-minded professors and red-nosed toppers, then this is just the book for you." (**Kirkus Reviews**)

"American Cornball is a winning testament to broad-minded playfulness and nerdy expertise, and it's the perfect book to dip into over and over again: it's funny and smart and endlessly informative about everything Americans thought to be funny, from Rilke to rolling pins." (**Jim Shepard, author of *Like You'd Understand, Anyway***)

"Christopher Miller recreates a lost world in mind-boggling detail, and explores its implications without losing his aplomb, or his sense of humor." (**Geoffrey O'Brien, author of *Stolen Glimpses*, *Captive Shadows* and *The Phantom Empire***)

"Miller's thick tome, organized encyclopedically, is discursive, illuminating, and erudite." (boingboing.com,

best 2014 books for nerds)

“Christopher Miller...has written an erudite, entertaining and addictive compendium of things that used to make Americans laugh and nowadays don't.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“An uncommonly brilliant idea...extremely clever...Miller's utterly brilliant encyclopedia of things that were 'formerly funny' in America...” (*Buffalo News*)

“There is no way anyone interested in humor won't find this book essential reading.” (*Inkspill*)

From the Back Cover

Christopher Miller's *American Cornball* is an indispensable history of our shared legacy of forgotten humor by one of our wittiest cultural observers; it's also "that rare book on humor that is as entertaining as its subject" (*Publishers Weekly*). From hiccups and henpecked husbands to outhouses and old maids, Miller revisits nearly two hundred comic staples, their (often unseemly) origins, their cultural roots, and what they reveal about American society. The result is a grand tour of the world we came from and too often forget—a world of black and white, highbrow and lowbrow, witty and wacky, the awkward and the sublime.

Complete with more than two hundred period illustrations, *American Cornball* is a masterwork of cultural excavation . . . and a genuine laff riot.

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