



# Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters

By Ted Cohen



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**Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters** By Ted Cohen

Abe and his friend Sol are out for a walk together in a part of town they haven't been in before. Passing a Christian church, they notice a curious sign in front that says "\$1,000 to anyone who will convert." "I wonder what that's about," says Abe. "I think I'll go in and have a look. I'll be back in a minute; just wait for me."

Sol sits on the sidewalk bench and waits patiently for nearly half an hour. Finally, Abe reappears.

"Well," asks Sol, "what are they up to? Who are they trying to convert? Why do they care? Did you get the \$1,000?"

Indignantly Abe replies, "Money. That's all you people care about."

Ted Cohen thinks that's not a bad joke. But he also doesn't think it's an easy joke. For a listener or reader to laugh at Abe's conversion, a complicated set of conditions must be met. First, a listener has to recognize that Abe and Sol are Jewish names. Second, that listener has to be familiar with the widespread idea that Jews are more interested in money than anything else. And finally, the listener needs to know this information in advance of the joke, and without anyone telling him or her. Jokes, in short, are complicated transactions in which communities are forged, intimacy is offered, and otherwise offensive stereotypes and clichés lose their sting—at least sometimes.

*Jokes* is a book of jokes and a book about them. Cohen loves a good laugh, but as a philosopher, he is also interested in how jokes work, why they work, and when they don't. The delight at the end of a joke is the result of a complex set of conditions and processes, and Cohen takes us through these conditions in a philosophical exploration of humor. He considers questions of audience, selection of joke topics, the ethnic character of jokes, and their morality, all with plenty of examples that will make you either chuckle or wince.



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## **Editorial Review**

From Kirkus Reviews

Befitting its subject, this study of jokes is neither deep nor systematic, but light, funny, and thought-provoking. As one suspicious of theories, Cohen (Philosophy/Univ. of Chicago) offers "no comprehensive theory of jokes," contenting himself instead with relatively disconnected remarks about how some jokes work and "what their existence may show about those of us who love them." This lack of philosophical ambition is frustrating at times, with some observations trite (e.g., that we joke about death to gain power over it) or insufficiently explored (the promising but stunted section on how one creates a joke). Yet the method fits the material, allowing the author to pepper the book with a diversity of jokes without flattening their humor as a steamroller theory might. Such a book is only as good as its jokes, and most of his are good. His taste runs to long and detailed (the longest runs three pages) but with punch lines worth the wait: see the one about the New York cab driver whose fare wants to be driven to Chicago. But short jokes are supplied too: "What's big and gray, and wrote gloomy poetry? T.S. Elephant." Most are cerebral, sometimes excessively so: "Wagner is the Puccini of music" is funny when you think about it, but "What's round and purple, and commutes to work? An Abelian grape" may elude all but mathematicians. Among Cohen's better points: all jokes are conditional, presupposing varying degrees of knowledge in the audience; successful jokes achieve intimacy between teller and hearer; and jokes can seem morally objectionable while also being funny. The most detailed treatment is given to Jewish jokes, which Cohen traces to biblical and talmudic roots and characterizes as outsiders' humor rife with "crazy logic." It's not Aristotle's lost book on comedy, but it does combine entertainment and ideas in one gossamer package. -- Copyright ©1999, *Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

From the Inside Flap

*Jokes* is a book of jokes as well as a book about them. Ted Cohen loves a good laugh, but as a philosopher, he is also interested in how jokes work, why they work, and when they don't. Jokes: more humorous than other philosophy books, more philosophical than other humor books.

About the Author

**Ted Cohen** is a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago. He is the editor of *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics and Pursuits of Reason*.

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**Stephen Ross:**

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