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Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters

By Ted Cohen



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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. *Jokes*: more humorous than other philosophy books, more philosophical than other humor books.

"Befitting its subject, this study of jokes is . . . light, funny, and thought-provoking. . . . [T]he 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. . . . [E]ntertainment and ideas in one gossamer package."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"One of the many triumphs of Ted Cohen's *Jokes*-apart from the not incidental fact that the jokes are so good that he doesn't bother to compete with them-is that it never tries to sound more profound than the jokes it tells. . . . [H]e makes you feel he is doing an unusual kind of philosophy. As though he has managed to turn J. L. Austin into one of the Marx Brothers. . . . Reading *Jokes* makes you feel that being genial is the most profound thing we ever do-which is something jokes also make us feel-and that doing philosophy is as natural as being amused."—Adam Phillips, *London Review of Books*

"[A] lucid and jargon-free study of the remarkable fact that we divert each other with stories meant to make us laugh. . . . An illuminating study, replete with killer jokes."—Kevin McCardle, *The Herald* (Glasgow)

"Cohen is an ardent joke-maker, keen to offer us a glimpse of how jokes are crafted and to have us dwell rather longer on their effects."—Barry C. Smith, *Times Literary Supplement*

"Because Ted Cohen loves jokes, we come to appreciate them more, and perhaps think further about the quality of good humor and the appropriateness of laughter in our lives."—Steve Carlson, *Christian Science Monitor*

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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 (1939-2014) was a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago from 1967 until his death. He was the author of *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* and *Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor* and co-editor of *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics* and *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*.

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Gwen Anderson:

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