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What's So Funny

Two books on jokes, Jewish and gentile.

By Edward Kosner July 12, 2013 3:05 pm ET

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Here's a classic Jewish joke:

A Jewish mother is at the beach with her 3-year-old son when a giant wave sweeps the boy out to sea. The hysterical mother prays: "God, if you return my son I'll keep a kosher home, go to temple every week and be a pious wife."

A second giant wave sweeps in and deposits the boy at his mother's feet. The mother looks up at the sky and exclaims: "He was wearing a hat."

Here's another:

A skeleton walks into the doctor's office. The doctor says, "NOW you come to see me!"

And a third:

Izzy and Moe go to Hyman's funeral. Izzy looks down at the coffin and says: "Doesn't he look wonderful?"

"Why not," says Moe. "He just came back from Miami."

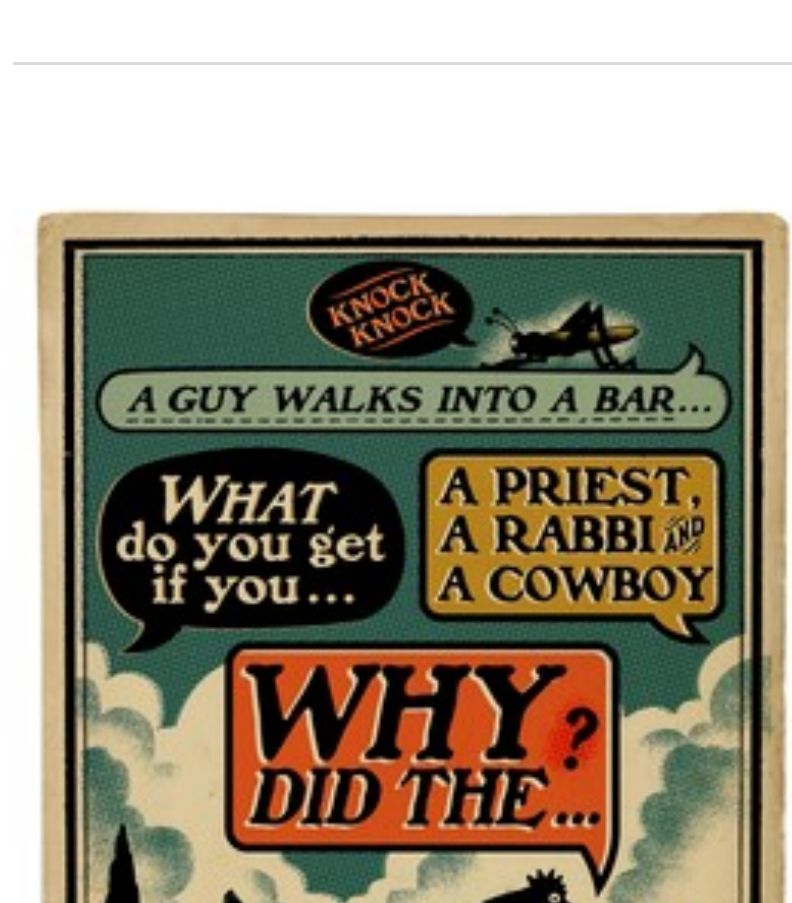
What makes these jokes funny? What makes them Jewish? If you substitute Paddy, Mike and Fintan for Izzy, Moe and Hyman, and you swap Mallorca for Miami, is the joke as good?

Funny you should ask.

Jokes are like soufflés or houses of cards: If you look at them the wrong way, they just might collapse. Still, from the ancient Greeks through Sigmund Freud and on to our times, very smart people keep trying to analyze where jokes come from, what their emotional function is, and where the genius of their humor lies.

NO JOKE

By Ruth R. Wisse Princeton, 279 pages, \$24.95

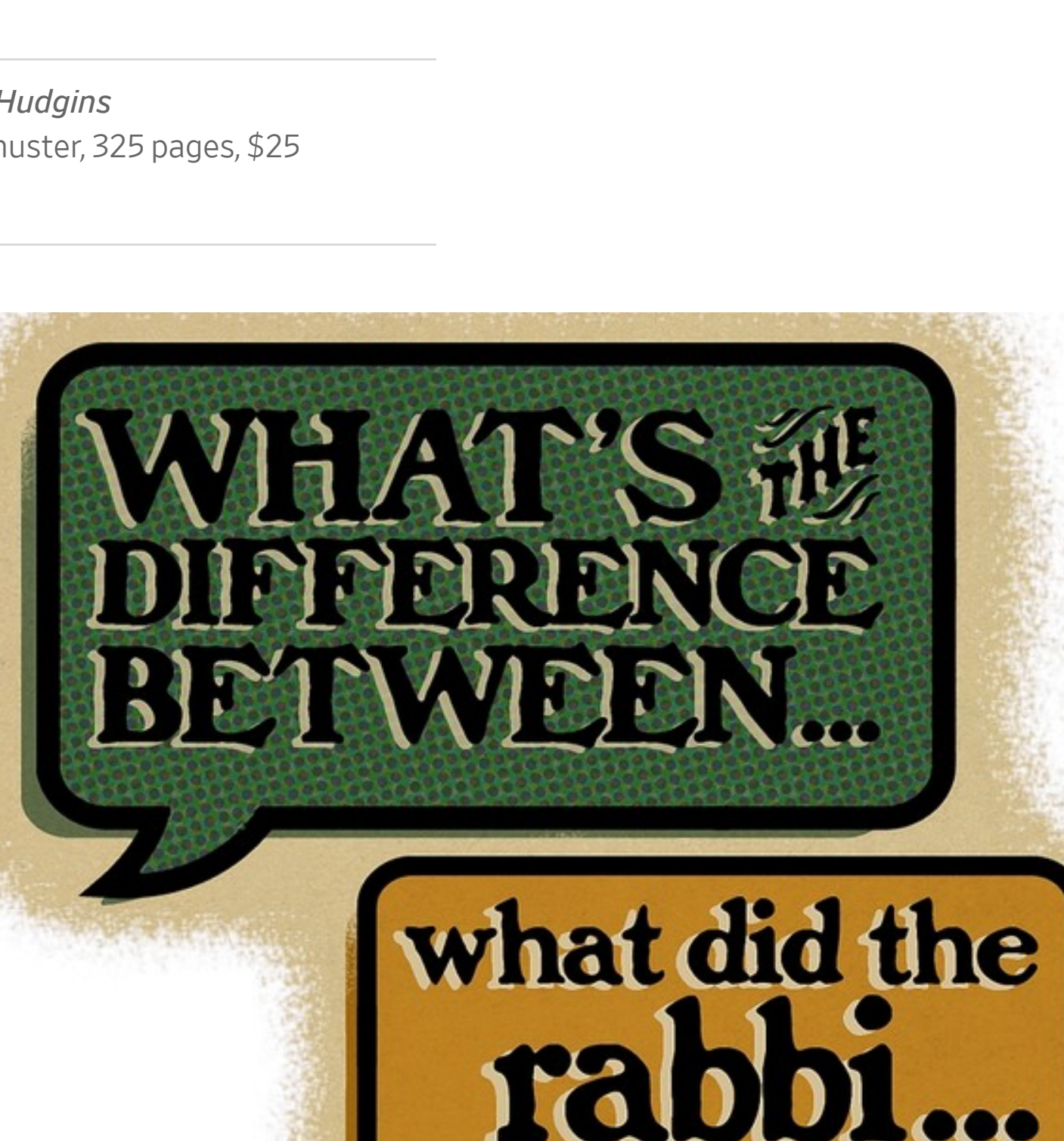


DOUGLAS JONES

devastated by history," the best jokes turning on the incongruities of Jewish existence. Yet, she observes, despite the depredations of the Persians, Babylonians, Romans and so many others who tormented the Jews over the centuries, the concept of a distinct Jewish style of humor dates only to the 17th- and 18th-century Enlightenment in the heart of Western Europe. And she proclaims Heinrich Heine "the fountainhead and genius" of German Jewish humor, which powerfully influenced the other strains.

THE JOKER

By Andrew Hudgins Simon & Schuster, 325 pages, \$25



DOUGLAS JONES

Heine, a poet, journalist and critic, flourished in the first half of the 19th century just as Jews were beginning to enter German society, many by converting to Christianity, as he himself did to advance his career. He was merciless in lampooning the gentiles for welcoming these ambitious despised and the Jews for selling their birthright and truckling to the Christians, who actually despised them. Jokes ridiculing social-climbing Jews remain a mainstay of Jewish humor. Ms. Wisse includes one of the best from a half-century or more ago:

A rich American-Jewish widow is determined to rise in society. She hires coaches to help her shed her Yiddish accent and coarse ways. Once she feels ready, she registers at a restricted resort, enters the dining room perfectly coiffed, wearing a basic black dress with a single string of pearls, and orders a dry martini—which the waiter accidentally spills on her lap. The woman cries: "Oy vey!—whatever that means!"

An older joke:

The banker Otto Kahn, who had converted to Christianity, was walking along the street with a hunchback when they passed a synagogue. "You know, I used to be a Jew," says Kahn.

Replies his friend: "And I used to be a hunchback."

Ms. Wisse painstakingly teases out the distinctions between the satiric humor derived from the Western Enlightenment, the paradoxical waggery of the ecstatic Hasidim of Eastern Europe, who swapped ironic tales that ridiculed the temporal world and often their own piety, and the brains rabbinical wit of the traditionalists, with their taste for Talmudic wordplay. She traces the zany subversion of Groucho Marx directly to the Hasidic assault on Enlightenment propriety.

And she is equally good at tracking the ineffectual schlemiels of the folkloric Yiddish masters Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Across the ocean and the decades, they morphed into the wistful Danny Kaye and into Woody Allen's early persona as a lovable, slope-shouldered loser. Indeed, "No Joke" comes to life for a general reader when Ms. Wisse moves on to professional comedy—a métier perfected in the Catskills Borscht Belt by Jewish immigrants and their American-born descendants, who invented the one-liner:

What are the three words a woman doesn't want to hear when she's making love?

"Honey, I'm home."

"The sociology of the Borscht Belt," she writes, "ensured that most of the humorists, like most of the guests, would be Jewish. When the emerging medium of radio went looking for entertainers, it took those who had mastered timing and delivery. Movies and television picked off talent from the stage and radio. Jews developed comedy the way Chinese restaurants taught the United States to eat with chopsticks." Some estimates, she notes, have put the fraction of Jews at four out of every five American comedians.

Catskills humor was inward—about Jews for Jews who could relax and laugh about themselves insulated from the presence of disapproving gentiles. A favorite target was the henpecked husband in thrall to his dominating wife. In a later Jackie Mason routine, the nebbish can't even order food without her permission: "Do I like this? . . . I thought I did. . . I don't? It's up to you."

Ms. Wisse segues effortlessly from Borscht Belt spritzing to Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Bruce Jay Friedman and, especially, Philip Roth, who gave post-World War II American writing a distinctive tang of Jewish humor, often black. Heller's protagonist in "Catch 22," she points out, was originally Jewish until he was transmuted into the Armenian Yossarian. It was Mr. Roth, in "Portnoy's Complaint," she says, who pushed the boundaries further than anyone had before.

"Portnoy breaks taboos not by bedding Gentiles but rather by insulting them . . ." she writes. "There was nothing new in Jews making fun of other Jews—of Judaism, Zionism, the Jewish family, Jewish law, prayer, the Bible, or even God. But a Jew spoofing Christianity in the language of Christians was another matter. . . [N]ot since Masada fell to the Romans had Jews gone up with such brio against the majority."

The dark Jewish humor of Heller and Mr. Roth is cheerful pastel compared with the response of the Jews facing death under Hitler and Stalin and later trapped in the Eastern European puppet states of the Soviet Empire. Ms. Wisse provides a rich assortment of mordant wit at the threshold of extinction:

Two Jews waiting before a communist firing squad are told they're going to be hanged instead.

"You see," says one, "they've run out of ammunition!"

Another:

What is the difference between Kolkhoz, the collective farm, and Kol Nidrei, the Yom Kippur prayer?

Kol Nidrei means you don't eat for a day; Kolkhoz means you don't eat for a year.

The very darkest jokes, she writes, were inspired by the Holocaust: "To the motto inscribed over the gate at Auschwitz, Arbeit macht frei, Jews added fun lebn: 'Work liberates you—from life.'"

Once the State of Israel was established in 1948, the humor of the Jewish survivors there underwent yet another transformation. She cites American rabbi Joseph Telushkin's observation that Jews in Israel can deal with their problems directly and don't joke to settle for the substitute gratification of humor—"Israelis, for example, don't joke much about their Arab opponents; they fight them."

Given the vast variety and boundless ingenuity of the humor created by Jews over the centuries, Ms. Wisse can be forgiven if she opts not to frame a Grand Theory delineating it all. What's salient, she concludes, is Jews' tenacious reliance on humor—not the exegesis of the mockery.

When one opens the poet Andrew Hudgins's odd, slightly creepy memoir, "The Joker," it's clear that we're not at Gossinger's anymore. This is a near-encyclopedia of goyishe humor. Indeed, the first examples he delivers are those white-bread elephant jokes that were the rage among pre-adolescents in the early 1960s:

What's gray and dangerous?

An elephant with a machine gun.

A more complex example:

Why do ducks have flat feet?

From stomping out forest fires.

Why do elephants have flat feet?

From stomping out burning ducks.

If T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock measured out his life in coffee spoons, Mr. Hudgins prefers jokes—the more inane or offensive the better. He inundates the reader with gags about dead babies, Helen Keller, the Little Moron and the armless, legless boy whose parents put him out on the porch and called him Matt. Only knock-knock jokes are mercifully absent.

The son of a Methodist U.S. Air Force officer and a hard-shell Baptist mother from the red-clay Georgia boondocks, young Andrew grew up on military bases in the U.S. and Europe. He was bookish and so badly coordinated that he was never even chosen to play right field in schoolyard ballgames. But early on he discovered that he had a facility not only for telling jokes but for remembering every one he had ever heard. Now he could get classmates to pay attention, sometimes even the girls whose mysterious private parts he could only obsessively imagine.

So jokes became the soundtrack of his life and an instruction manual for the reality of the adult world. He plucked from them clues about sex, religion, death, racism, homophobia, sports rivalries and his own character. He instinctively grasps that humor derives from paradox. "Laughter. . ." he writes, "is the result of our human double vision. We see both the perfect world we desire and the flawed one we live in."

Hermetically sealed as he was in the outwardly wholesome cultures of the military and evangelical Christianity, Mr. Hudgins was inevitably drawn to the lubricious, scatological, cruel parallel universe of offensive jokes. He tells endless gags about Jesus, the Bible, the Rev. Martin Luther King, redneck sheriffs, hillbillies with a yen for bestiality, Nazis, gays, sex organs, the dumb and the deformed—none of which can be repeated in this newspaper.

Sheepishly, he relates how he exchanged unflattering black jokes with Condoleezza Rice at a Stanford party when he was a graduate student and she a rising academic star. And toward the end of the book, he takes the reader inside his bedroom to show how jokes have been intimately involved in his love affairs and two marriages—glimpses I'd rather be spared.

His monologue does offer some useful insights. A racist joke, he observes, may reflect badly on the perpetrator of the bigotry or the victim depending on who is telling the joke and who is listening to it.

A particularly cruel joke about Jesus on the cross "always makes me flinch," confesses Mr. Hudgins. "Oddly, the joke reminds us of Jesus' humanity and torment in the body but at the same time it mocks the gravity of the moment. Like . . . Helen Keller jokes, it . . . pushes fear into laughter."

None of Mr. Hudgins's jokes would likely turn up in Ms. Wisse's study, and about the only Jew in his joke book (except Jesus) is a rabbi who wanders into a bordello, followed inevitably by an evangelical minister and a Roman Catholic priest. While both brands of humor are rooted in paradox, their sensibilities are so different that it's a small miracle they're both good for a laugh. Seriously.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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