

*Putting the Supernatural in Its Place* is an insightful look at how supernatural lore dynamically influences the spaces we inhabit, through a varied and appealing range of spooky subjects.

Benjamin Radford

Center for Inquiry, Buffalo NY

Elliott Oring, *Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor*. 2016. Utah State University Press. 268 pages. ISBN: 978-1-60732-491-1 (paperback)

Although jokes and anecdotes have been regarded by most folklorists internationally as one of the most widespread prosaic folkloric forms of the twentieth century, scholarly study of these genres in this period never received academic attention comparable to that received by contemporary legends since the 1960s and, especially, since the 1980s. This paradox will be definitively investigated by future historians of the field; although many important studies on jokes have been written by folklorists, solid book-length studies, especially ones which could provide new theoretical approaches to joking, were, until recently, strangely absent. The reason for such neglect is obvious in the case of the former Communist countries; although local folklorists recognized the importance of studying jokes, it was politically problematic to study contemporary vernacular humor, which was very often critical of the ruling regimes and/or of official ideology. Local folklorists thus usually turned to the study of historical layers of traditional rural or urban humor, neglecting vibrant contemporary traditions. It is not surprising, then, that one of the first studies mentioning "Radio Yerevan" jokes, popular all over the former Soviet bloc, was written by U.S. folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand in 1972. In my own academic context of the former Czechoslovakia, the first folkloristic studies on contemporary jokes did not appear until the mid-1970s, written by legend scholar Oldřich Širovátka, (who, however, absolutely neglected the most popular political jokes). This attitude changed—globally—in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and then especially in the new millennium, when scholarly interest in vernacular humor gained momentum. In addition to many annotated collections, several new theoretical approaches appeared, most notably those propagated by Christie Davies (1990; 1998; 2011), and by the post-semiotic investigations of several Russian folklorists adhering to the concept of "*postfolklor*" (*postfolklore*).

The present volume, written by distinguished U. S. folklorist—and leading humor scholar—Elliott Oring, takes this renewed interest in vernacular humor to a completely new level. Although historically there

have been several theoretical approaches to joking that could be labelled specifically "folkloristic" (i.e. they were created by experts in this field; one can name for example several German folklorists, such as Hermann Bausinger and Hannjost Lixfeld), the majority of folkloristic research on jokes has drawn heavily on classical theories of humor developed in psychology (most notably from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud from 1905), in literary theory (e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman), and especially in philosophy. In Oring's new book (his *fifth* volume on humor, if I count correctly) he also discusses these classical theories (and much more than these—he investigates almost *every* important contribution to humor studies, drawing also from anthropology, linguistics and other fields), but in an incomparable analytic way, encompassing a critical evaluation of the most recent developments in humor studies. Building on his previous humor scholarship, Oring investigates four major generalized theoretical positions in the study of humor: a "*general theory of verbal humor*," a "*conceptual integration theory*," a "*benign violation theory*," and a "*false-belief theory*," (in chapter 2, "Parsing the Joke: General Theory of Verbal Humor and Appropriate Incongruity"; chapter 3, "Blending and Humor"; chapter 4, "On Benign Violations"; and chapter 5, "Humor and the Discovery of False Beliefs," respectively). More importantly, he brings his own (very strong) conceptual frame to the understanding of joking, first formulated in the early 1990s. This is his "*appropriate incongruity theory*," according to which the humor is based on "the perception of an appropriate interrelationship of elements from domains that are generally regarded as incongruous"; the humor effect is thus based "on perceiving a conflation of incongruous words, behaviors, visual forms, or ideas that nevertheless seem appropriately related" (x). The appropriate incongruity theory was, as the author himself notes, as a notion (or in its nascent form), formulated by his predecessors as early as the late eighteenth century; however, Oring defines and defends this approach in such a compelling way that it is very hard (at least for me) not to agree with his standpoint.

Other chapters of the book are devoted to more specific problems connected with jokes and joking. Especially illuminating is the author's initial discussion of Freud in chapter 1, "What Freud Actually Said About Jokes." I find it eerily bizarre—and, perhaps appropriately, also very funny—how many noted humor scholars grossly misinterpreted Freud's pioneering work (I could easily add a few more names from Eastern and Central Europe, too).

Also very useful is the author's detailed analysis in chapter 7, "Risky Business: Joking in Repressive Regimes." This specific kind of joking discourse is among those most thoroughly investigated by contemporary

historians and folklorists alike (such as Stokker 1997 and, more recently, Herzog 2011), but this research is often carried out without a proper conceptual framework; this is provided by Oring, along with the useful analytic term of “repressive regime,” which could be easily applied to many different historical political forms, not only the most often analyzed Nazi and Communist regimes. I also find Oring’s discussion in chapter 9, “What Is a Narrative Joke?” to be very important; he argues that this “genre” mostly serves as a purely residual category to label jokes that do not fit into other, better defined categories. A majority of all jokes are, according to Oring, actually dialogues, not narratives proper. This chapter offers several new impulses to the modern study of genre.

The remaining chapters deal with similarly specific subjects, such as joking and popular culture (chapter 6, “Framing Borat”), internet humor (chapter 8, “Listing toward Lists: Jokes on the Internet”), Jewish jokes (chapter 10 “Demythologizing the Jewish Joke”), and also more general problems connected with the aesthetics and performance of jokes (chapter 11, “From the Ridiculous to the Sublime: Jokes and Art”; chapter 12, “Contested Performance and Joke Aesthetics”).

Oring’s book, combined with his previous studies, could be regarded as one of the most important—and I hope also the most influential—contributions to humor studies to have appeared worldwide in last few decades. It is especially heartening that the book can be considered, in disciplinary terms, to have come out of folkloristics, the field which should be the leading discipline in the study of humor but which, alas, has devoted much of its history only to collecting countless humorous texts while, in terms of theory, merely resting on the shoulders of giants from other, more respected fields such as psychology, literary theory and philosophy. Oring’s research could change this.

The book is also useful specifically to legend scholars. Legends (especially contemporary legends) not only can be humorous but can also closely resemble jokes in terms of their form, structure, performance and practice. Yet in former Communist countries contemporary legends were historically often documented and studied under labels of *anecdote* or *skaz* (memorates) rather than as legends proper. Oring’s seminal work is thus important to folklorists from these countries, especially those strong in contemporary vernacular humor studies (such as Estonia and Poland), where the theories of humor propagated by Davies have gained much popularity. Oring’s book can provide a much needed theoretical alternative for this field.

Along with aforementioned influential studies by Davies, combined with renewed international interest in specific forms of vernacular humor that were not thoroughly investigated in the past (forms such as practical jokes, recently analyzed by Marsh (2015), and especially the vast field

of internet humor studied under the label of “digital folklore”), maybe we are witnessing the advent of a new field of humor studies, in which folklorists’ voice will be more strongly heard.

### References

- Jan Harold Brunvand. 1972. The Study of Contemporary Folklore: Jokes. *Fabula* 13.1: 1-19.
- Christie Davies. 1990. *Ethnic Humour Around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1998. *Jokes and Their Relation to Society*. The Hague: De Gruyter Mouton.
- . 2011. *Jokes and Targets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sigmund Freud. 1905. *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*. Leipzig: Franz Deticke.
- Herzog, Rudolph. 2011. *Dead Funny. Humor in Hitler’s Germany*. New York: Melville House.
- Moir Marsh. 2015. *Practically Joking*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Stokker, Kathleen. 1997. *Folklore Fights the Nazis. Humor in Occupied Norway, 1940-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Petr Janeček  
Charles University

Christa C. Jones and Claudia Schwabe. *New Approaches to Teaching Folk and Fairy Tales*. 2016. Logan: Utah State University Press. 252 pages. 978-1607324805 (paperback).

From Perrault to the Brothers Grimm, folk and fairy tales have long been employed for pedagogical purposes. While such tales found an early role in universities as teaching tools and research items, there was little expansion of their use until, as Donald Haase discusses in the forward to *New Approaches to Teaching Folk and Fairy Tales*, “the study of folktales and fairy tales ... took a radical turn in the 1970s and 80s, a turn that reinvented, revitalized, and expanded the field across disciplines” (vi). Such expansion led to the demand and development of university classes entirely focused on and based in fairy tales and folktales. Yet, despite the greater interest, teachers wishing to design their own courses were left mostly to their own devices, as there was and still is “relatively little publicly, in print or otherwise, about teaching folktales and fairy tales” (vi). Seeing this lack in the discipline, Christa C. Jones and Claudia Schwabe have produced a much-needed guide in their seminal work *New Approaches to Teaching Folk and Fairy Tales*.