

still needs clarification. Similarly, the reasoning for the choice of particular genres for this study remains ungrounded. The description of research methods and sources is rather scattered through the book and the reader never knows how many interviews were conducted or how the author searched for her materials (e.g. family histories). Moreover, the ethical approaches to the collected materials remain obscure. For instance, it is not explained in the case of the personal letter archive (with one of the correspondents being already dead), which is even more puzzling due to the fact that the research took place in Canada, where folklorists traditionally must follow strict ethical guidelines.

A clearly articulated methodology, a change of theoretical frames, and a more cohesive integration of its different parts would have brought this book to a very high level, given its already robust basis—the multifarious fieldwork materials.

ANASTASIYA ASTAPOVA

*University of Tartu
Estonia*



Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor. By Elliott Oring. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2016. Pp. xiii + 282, preface, afterword, references, notes, bibliography, author bio, index. \$34.95 paperback.)

Joke theorists, beware! If you're going to publish a new theory of humor and jokes, know that your work will soon be in Elliott Oring's crosshairs. All to the good, of course: any decent theory deserves a critique that can identify its weaknesses and suggest improvements. Four recent theories—the General Theory of Verbal Humor, Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending Theory), Benign Violation Theory, and False-Belief Theory—come under Oring's scrutiny. All are found wanting in various ways, primarily due to neglect or marginalization of the concept of *appropriate incongruity*. This last is less a full-blown theory than a working hypothesis, and Oring himself notes that it “is only a *better*

formulation of what is going on” (215) than what other scholars of humor have come up with in addressing the question “What is humor?” However, the concept is so demonstrably instrumental in evaluating the way jokes work that any worthwhile theory of humor needs to deal with it, either by examples that justify its inapplicability or by incorporating it as an essential insight and improving upon it.

The question of how jokes work, and the concept of appropriate incongruity, have been themes in Oring’s earlier collections of essays: *Jokes and Their Relations* (1992) and *Engaging Humor* (2003) reveal an earthy appreciation of jokes, not as museum pieces, but as the heart of verbal interaction. The title of his 1992 book alludes, of course, to Freud’s groundbreaking *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). Oring pays homage to Freud throughout his work on humor, and the present collection is no exception, the title of the first essay being “What Freud Actually Said About Jokes.”

A collection *of* jokes is not the same as an essay *about* jokes, as Oring himself has noted (2003), though some readers may expect the latter to be funny. Just as one does not expect a book about art to be aesthetically pleasing, we should not expect to find Chapter Six, “Framing Borat,” by turns hilarious, disgusting, or disturbing. Nor is “Risky Business: Political Jokes in Repressive Regimes” itself risky (at least not yet). Nevertheless, what might have been a distanced and dry analysis is always leavened with jokes well reported (many of which have gone into this writer’s repertoire). “Listing toward Lists: Jokes on the Internet,” and “What is a Narrative Joke?” neatly juxtapose two joke forms at extremes of presentational format. Internet joke lists present a simple joke setup followed by a list of alternative punch lines, sometimes framed as a single verbal response to an earlier action established in the setup, as in the bishop’s comments on an inebriated priest’s sermon. Such a structure compresses multiple variations of the joke into a single telling. In the case of longer narrative jokes, Oring suggests that these are also relatively recent forms that might have evolved from comic tales (those saturated with humor throughout, rather than concentrated in a punchline), since “*before the nineteenth century, humorous narratives in which a hidden narrative*

function is revealed in the punchline are almost absent (164; italics in original)."

Chapter Ten, "Demythologizing the Jewish Joke," is, for this reviewer, so far-reaching in its applicability, despite the apparent narrowness of its subject, and so meticulously wrought that it should be assigned reading in graduate as well as undergraduate folklore courses. Oring begins by defining the term "the Jewish joke" and exploring its various aspects: quality, origins, characteristics, impetus (motivations), performance, and functions. He then proceeds to raise questions regarding the applicability and implications of the genre, the comparative methods in its analysis, and its use and operation in historical and social contexts. From this analysis, Oring frames five hypotheses and concludes that as a folk expression, the Jewish joke "has been elevated to the status of a cultural symbol, becoming so infused with value and emotion that its authenticity seems unchallengeable.... It is time to demythologize the Jewish joke and bring it firmly into the realm of history (181)." The structure of this essay is exemplary of how to do folkloristic analysis of a verbal genre (and subgenre), and can be applied to other genres. The study of material and cadential (music and dance) culture, as well as a host of verbal ones, can all benefit from this kind of work.

The last two essays, "From the Ridiculous to the Sublime: Jokes and Art," and "Contested Performance and Joke Aesthetics," show that an argument tightly reasoned from the beginning can lead to the exploration of new directions. In other words, far from being "merely" a collection of essays, the book is one whole, and worth reading from beginning to end. *Joking Asides*, despite its title, is considerably more than a group of "asides," though perhaps it's truer to say that folkloristics naturally focuses on peripheral aspects of culture, not merely as glosses on what is generally regarded as "the real point," but as concise and intensified versions of central phenomena. What if the study of such matters as appropriate incongruity could tell us what the heart of the matter is all about? What if the epiphenomenal *is* the point?

PAUL JORDAN-SMITH
Western States Folklore Society