

Book Reviews

O'Shannon, Dan (2012). *What Are You Laughing at? A Comprehensive Guide to the Comedic Event*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic. 272 pp. ISBN 978-1441162939.

What Are You Laughing at? A Comprehensive Guide to the Comedic Event

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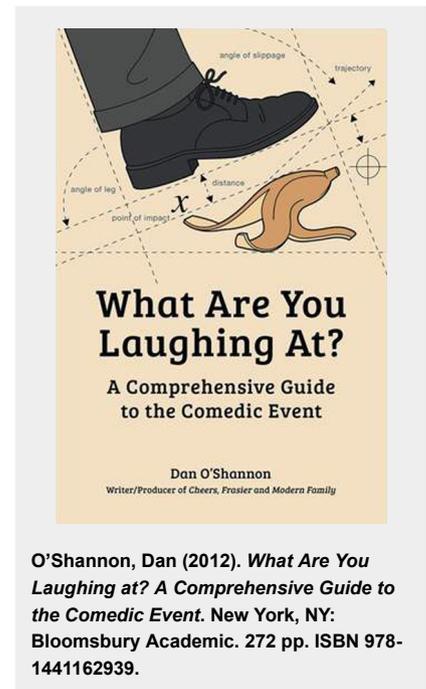
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What is the essence of humor? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for laughter to occur? These sorts of questions have intrigued and perplexed philosophers and researchers since at least the time of Plato and Aristotle. Like the six blind men trying to describe an elephant, most theories have attempted to build a complete explanation of humor out of one or two particular aspects of this multifaceted phenomenon. Various theories, for example, have tried to explain all of humor in terms of aggression, superiority, relief, incongruity, surprise, disgust, or subversion. Each theory is able to explain a subset of jokes or comedic situations, but very few seem capable of accounting for the full range of laughter-evoking phenomena. In *What Are You Laughing at? A Comprehensive Guide to the Comedic Event*, Dan O'Shannon makes a very laudable attempt to do just that.

Unlike most contemporary humor theorists, O'Shannon is not an academic ensconced in an ivory tower, but instead is a successful comedy writer who has honed his comedic skills as a writer and producer of such award-winning television sitcoms as *Cheers*, *Frasier*, and *Modern Family*. Nonetheless, he is clearly familiar with much of the academic writing on humor, and he occasionally compares and contrasts his own theory with those discussed in the research literature. However, most of his ideas come from his own very careful and systematic analyses of the nature and determinants of laughter carried out over a lifetime of trying to make people laugh. Not surprisingly, the book is written in a light-



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hearted, breezy style, with plenty of jokes and amusing anecdotes, but beneath the veneer of frivolity lies a very well-reasoned, systematic, and comprehensive theory that should cause academics in the humor research field to sit up and take notice.

O'Shannon presents his ideas as a theory of *comedy* rather than humor, and indeed the word *humor* rarely appears in the book. However, he defines comedy in much the same way that contemporary humor scholars refer to humor: as an umbrella term used to describe all forms of funny, amusing, or laughter-evoking phenomena. These include not only performances such as sitcoms, stand-up comedy, and joke-telling, but also the funny things that arise – both intentionally and unintentionally – in everyday conversations, such as amusing anecdotes, witticisms, conversational banter, and puns, as well as humorous non-verbal pratfalls, gaffes, and mishaps. Thus, for the humor scholar, this book is really a theory of humor and not just comedy. O'Shannon also uses the term *joke* in a very broad sense to refer to any humorous stimulus or event, whether it takes a verbal, visual, behavioral, or tactile form, and whether it is intentional or unintentional.

According to O'Shannon, comedy (which I'll call humor from here on) is not a characteristic of a stimulus, such as a joke or funny event, but instead is a subjective experience occurring within the perceiver (or receiver, in O'Shannon's terminology). A complete theory of humor therefore cannot focus only on the elements of the joke itself for a full explanation of funniness, but must also take into account the cognitive, affective, and social processes occurring within the receiver. This explains why the same joke may be hilarious to one person and barely worth a chuckle to another, or why the same person may find a particular event very amusing in one context but not in another. The crucial determinant of whether or not a receiver experiences a stimulus as funny is not so much a characteristic of the stimulus as it is the receiver's own *choice* to perceive it as funny. This choice is influenced in part by characteristics of the stimulus, but also by the context and a variety of enhancing and inhibiting factors, which O'Shannon catalogues in considerable detail. These include, for example, the receiver's current mood and health, one's relationship to other people who may be present, and a wide range of supplementary emotions that may arise in response to the comedic event, such as feelings of superiority, disgust, identification, shock, or subversiveness. Thus, in O'Shannon's view, many of the elements that other theorists have seen as constituting the essence of humor (superiority, surprise, etc.) are better viewed as potential (but not essential) *enhancers* of the enjoyment of humor.

With regard to the comedic stimulus itself (the "joke" broadly defined), O'Shannon contends that two elements are necessary for humor to occur: incongruity and a particular type of cognitive process. Therefore, like many widely-held contemporary humor theories, this is essentially an incongruity theory. According to O'Shannon, humor essentially involves the recognition that something does not fit with our normal expectations of the world, coupled with an attitude of playfulness and the perception of the incongruity as safe, trivial, and nonthreatening. However, O'Shannon strongly disagrees with incongruity-resolution theories which were once fashionable among humor scholars and still have some influence in the research literature. These theories suggest that humor in a joke results from incongruity being introduced when the punchline does not seem to fit with the setup, and then being resolved by recognizing some ambiguity in the setup that allows the listener to make sense of the punchline after all. In contrast, O'Shannon argues that the purpose of a joke is not to *reso*lve incongruity, but to *create* and enhance incongruity, and to maintain it as long as possible.

O'Shannon presents a framework for conceptualizing and quantifying different levels of incongruity, and describes in detail a number of ways in which it may occur, including conceptual, attitudinal, behavioral, presentational,

physical, and logical incongruity. He also discusses the cognitive processes by which the receiver arrives at the perception of incongruity. These are divided into three main categories: (1) *straightforward information*, in which the incongruous elements are presented together with little “cognitive assembly” required on the part of the receiver; (2) *gap-filling*, in which the comedy material is presented in such a way that the receiver must fill in a cognitive blank in order to complete the incongruous picture; and (3) *recontextualization*, in which the receiver needs to find an alternative interpretation of previous information in order to perceive the incongruity. Through it all, O’Shannon illustrates his ideas with a wide range of jokes and material from various sitcoms, films, and plays, as well as personal anecdotes from everyday life. He also provides an interesting overview of the history of comedy in America over the 20th century.

How does all of this relate to the focus of the present special issue of *Europe’s Journal of Psychology*, which is devoted to research on the role of humor in well-being and health? O’Shannon’s focus is on the way humor works – particularly in the context of professional comedy, but also in everyday life – rather than its psychological health benefits. Nonetheless, this book may help to provide a broader theoretical context for thinking about the role of humor in well-being. The types of humor that contribute to psychological well-being likely do not merely involve spending a lot of time sitting on a couch watching comedy shows on television or constantly telling jokes to other people. More likely, health-enhancing humor involves actively finding comedic enjoyment in the context of everyday experiences, especially during times when life is stressful, challenging, or frustrating. These experiences of humor, which arise directly from one’s own life circumstances, enable the individual to perceive his or her life from a different perspective, to diminish the threats, and to gain an enhanced sense of control.

Although this book is not written as a guide to finding humor in adversity, several important practical insights may be drawn from it. First, humor essentially involves a playful attitude. In order to experience any potential psychological benefits of humor, an individual needs to be able to step out of the normally serious business of daily life and take some time to play. Second, humor is largely a social phenomenon: people laugh and engage in humor much more frequently when they are with others than when alone. To experience the health benefits of humor, it helps to have a variety of positive relationships with others with whom one can interact frequently in a playful manner. Third, humor involves the playful perception and generation of incongruity. We normally see incongruity as something to be avoided or minimized in our daily lives, whereas in humor we seek out and celebrate incongruity, playfully exaggerating it and exploring its various facets. Fourth, a humorous perspective involves imagination, the ability to elaborate on a basic humorous theme and create new incongruities by engaging in “what-if” thinking. Fifth, to fully enjoy humor one must have an awareness of the personal enhancers and inhibitors that influence one’s own level of enjoyment (e.g., mood states, the types of companions one associates with, the sorts of topics that evoke positive and negative emotional reactions, etc.). Besides suggesting some practical insights for enhancing humor in one’s own life, this book offers a wealth of ideas that could stimulate a good deal of further scholarly research, both basic and applied.

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