

Jewish Comedy
A Serious History
by **Jeremy Dauber**
WWNorton, \$28.95, xxxpp [no index yet]

The Jewish Joke
An essay with examples (less essay, more examples)
Profile Books, £9.99, 180pp

review by Erica Wagner

Everyone can agree that Jews are funny, right? You've got to give us that. Come on: the evidence is incontrovertible. Mel Brooks! Jerry Seinfeld! Joan Rivers! Jerry Lewis! Woody Allen! We can start arguing right away: I've never found either Joan Rivers or Jerry Lewis funny, though I won't dispute their cultural significance. As for Woody Allen, yeah, I know there are some problems there, these days. Tried watching *Manhattan* recently? Quite.

Here's what's not funny: books about comedy. The best kind of laughter is spontaneous and powerful, a biological phenomenon that takes over the body the way a sneeze or an orgasm does. But if we can agree (maybe we can, maybe we can't) that laughter is the opposite of crying, and therefore, of sorrow or grief, then surely it's worth investigating. And yet the investigation may leave you wondering why anything is funny, not least because one person's hilarity is another's mystification or revulsion. But are Brooks, Seinfeld et al funny because they are Jewish? And if so, what does being Jewish have to do with the fact that they're funny? Does it matter? Is it "Jewish humour" or just humour created by people who happen to be Jewish? If it is Jewish humour, where does that sensibility come from, and how is it connected to Jewish history and culture? A lot to take on board, *nu*?

These are the questions which Jeremy Dauber -- Atran Professor of Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture at Columbia University, so a fellow who knows what he's talking about -- is attempting to address. He admits from the get-go that the effort is going to be strenuous, and that looking "under the hood" of comedy "is certainly less entertaining than just listening to or reading it". [JD, xvii] Devorah Baum (also a scholar; she is Lecturer in English Literature and Critical Theory at the University of Southampton) provides lighter fare in *The Jewish Joke*: this is the book to turn to if you're looking to amuse your friends, and has something in common with the joke books we used to pass around as kids (yes, my friends, before the internet). But it too asks: why are these jokes Jewish? And is it their Jewishness that makes them funny?

Dauber goes back to the Bible. The first laughter in the Bible, he tells us, is Sarah's, when she's informed that she is to bear a child, despite her advanced age; her child is called Isaac, whose name means laughter. But the real centrepiece of his discussion is the book of Esther, which tells the story of Purim: how Queen Esther defeated the plot of the wicked Haman to destroy her people. How do you get from Queen Esther to Larry David, another touchstone of this book? The answer is both sophisticated and simple. Esther is an outsider (a Jew) who becomes an insider (marries the kind of Persia), while retaining her outsider status (she does not abandon her people). She skillfully negotiates the rules of her society, and the reader appreciates her story by observing and understanding those rules. *Seinfeld*, created by David with Jerry Seinfeld, may call itself "a show about nothing" but really it's a show about rules, as is *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, David's own HBO show -- set to return in the autumn after a six-year hiatus. Both shows push the boundaries of the appropriate, the allowed. Who gets to make the rules, anyway? Dauber quotes Mel Brooks, speaking about himself -- but the definition, as Dauber says, is more widely applicable: "Comedy comes from the feeling that, as a Jew, and as a person, you don't fit into the mainstream of American society. It comes from the realization that even though you're better and smarter, you'll never belong." [JD, 259]

Note that “American”: both these books keep their gaze firmly on the United States, though you wouldn’t know it from their titles. Plenty of Philip Roth, but only passing mention of Howard Jacobson; no David Schneider, no Rebecca Front. Sacha Baron-Cohen finds his way into Dauber’s nuanced discussion of anti-Semitism: Baron-Cohen’s Borat is famously anti-Semitic -- but his prejudice is powerfully undercut if you know that Borat’s “Khazakstani” is, in fact, Hebrew.

As to the climate in which that prejudice emerges, Dauber says that in the US Jewish claims and concerns of anti-Semitism are at “previously unimaginably low rates”, though he admits they are “rising slightly”. [JD, 167] I’m not sure when this book went to press, but the Anti-Defamation League reported an *86 per cent* spike in anti-Semitic incidents in the first months of 2017, after surging by more than a third the year before. (In the UK, the Community Security Trust also reported an increase of more than a third, to record levels, in 2016.) Hello, Donald Trump, hello Brexit. Dauber mentions briefly the Jewish identity of American television host and political commentator Jon Stewart, but he fails to mention Trump’s the anti-semitic taunt Trump tweeted to Stewart in 2013. “I promise you that I’m much smarter than Jonathan Liebowitz -- I mean Jon Stewart @TheDailyShow” wrote Trump. This is too bad, because it means readers miss out on Stewart’s meme-worthy response: “Many people don’t know this, but Donald Trump’s real name is Fuckface Von Clownstick. I wish you would embrace the Von Clownstick heritage.” Really funny. But also: not.

For this is where we are in 2017: a world in which who is inside and who is outside is, increasingly, no cause for amusement. Baum quotes a joke in which an old Jew is refused service in a restaurant.

“We don’t serve Jews here,” says the waiter.

“Don’t let that bother you,” replied the old man. “I don’t eat Jews.” [DB, 144]

The very same story -- or joke -- was told by the great African-American comedian Dick Gregory, who died in August at the age of 84. One time, he said, he walked into a restaurant in the South, only to be told “We don’t serve colored people here.” “That’s all right,” Gregory replied. “I don’t eat colored people. Just bring me a whole fried chicken.”

Both these books show sorrow that is the dark underside of laughter -- sorrow that belongs to everyone.

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