

# Culture & Critics



OMNIVORE

## What Is Comedy For?

*The question has never been harder to answer.*

By James Parker

What do you get if you give a whale a cellphone? Moby Dick pics.

I made that one up. Is it funny? I don't think so. Nonetheless, it's a joke. Or what Jesse David Fox, in his compendious, deeply considered, provoking, and rather dizzying new *Comedy Book*, calls a "joke-joke." A verbal-conceptual circuit, an abstract frivolity. "Joke-jokes," Fox writes, "are jokes you find in joke books. They're free-standing, authorless, utilitarian tools to produce laughter." Or if not laughter, then perhaps just a faint tickle in the forebrain, as of a very tiny problem, solved.

Fox, a comedy critic at *New York* magazine, is explaining joke-jokes to distinguish them from what comedians mean when they say "jokes"—comedy jokes—which are bits, stories, ideas, images, moods, themes, words, basically anything that produces the comedy feeling, that does the thing that comedy is supposed to do.

Which is what, exactly? What's comedy for? Ah, well, now we're in it. Comedy is for jabbing us in our pleasure centers. For being nice by being nasty. For puncturing grandiosity. For relieving tension, creating tension, living in tension. It's for making us laugh, but then again—is it?

We are in a moment, comedy-wise. On the one hand, there's never been more of it—more specials, podcasts, comedy-generated discussions and debate and cultural flare-ups. There's a rhythm and an expertise about comedy criticism

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right now (Fox's very much included) that reminds me of good jazz writing from the '50s and '60s: savvy, insidious, immersed, excited, with its own developing vocabulary.

On the other hand, comedy, like everything else, is in bits. Online, it has shattered into memes and trolls and culture warlords and goats singing Bon Jovi. Laughter itself has fragmented. Just listen to it: You've got your gurgling, impotent *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* laughter over here; you've got your harsh and barking energized Trumpist laughter over there; you've got your free-floating Joe Rogan-podcast yuks; and then you've got the private snuffling and seizure-like sounds that you yourself make when you're watching Jay Jurden Instagram clips alone, on your phone, with your earbuds in. And for most of us, behind all of this, the feeling that we're whistling past the graveyard: that the sludge is rising, politically; that the bullyboys are cracking their knuckles; that we're "just kind of half-waiting," as Marc Maron put it in a recent HBO special, "for the stupids to choose a uniform."

How did we get here? How did we arrive at a place where Jordan Peterson, who wouldn't know a good joke if it ran him over, is instructing us on the importance of comedy as a defense against totalitarianism, while Dave Chappelle—one of the funniest men alive—burns up his comic capital defending his right to be mean about trans people?

Not laughing. That's big right now too. Laughter withheld by the audience, out of disapproval, but also laughter withheld by the comedian: laughter checked, thwarted, confused, made to think about itself. Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette*, which debuted on Netflix in 2018, was the supreme exhibition of stopped laughter. Fox calls it "the most revolutionary piece of stand-up of my lifetime." Having carefully, and with many chuckles along the way, explained and deconstructed the primal mechanism of stand-up comedy for their audience—the building of tension, the controlled release—Gadsby then refused to do the second part. They built the tension, horrendously, via a story about a homophobic assault they'd suffered, and then left it there, held it there, undischarged. "This tension," they said. "It's yours. I am not helping you anymore. You need to learn what this feels like."

More recently, Jerrod Carmichael used his intimate, small-venue special, *Rothaniel*, to publicly come out as gay, fragilizing and tenderizing the whole exchange between a comedian and his audience. *Rothaniel*, by leaving the performer so exposed, made the audience wonder about the eagerness and vulgarity of its laughter.

Fox has thought long and hard about all of this—about TikTok, memes, sadness, Adam Sandler movies, Maria Bamford, bombing onstage, and the ultimate joke, which is death. He shares his own grief at the

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COMEDY BOOK:  
HOW COMEDY  
CONQUERED  
CULTURE—AND  
THE MAGIC THAT  
MAKES IT WORK

Jesse David  
Fox

FARRAR, STRAUS  
AND GIROUX

loss of his brother, and wonders whether comedy, in the end, might simply be for helping us get through this difficult and sorrow-filled life.

**DONALD TRUMP**, the stand-up at the gates of hell, is obviously a massive problem for comedy. Clinically humorless, destitute of jokes, too strange to be hacky, and with the comic precision of a broken bicycle chain, he still—as the comedians say—destroys. He *kills*, night after night. He gives people, by God, that comedy feeling, or his version of it: gaseous, loopy, sneering, idolatrous, incipiently violent. Fascist levity. He's almost a prop comic, but his prop is human weakness. Is he, in his dark-side-of-the-moon way, teaching us something about comedy? What if the breakthrough comedy event of the past five years was not *Nanette* or *Rothaniel* but the Trump rally where he said, "I can be more presidential than any candidate that ever ran, than any president, other than maybe Abraham Lincoln when he is wearing his hat"?

"The sense of what is funny," Fox writes in a chapter titled "Funny," "is so subjective—so completely built into your persona—that it feels objective." What's funny to you? What's funny to me? I worship Sarah Silverman. I can't understand Bo Burnham. Meanwhile, YouTube keeps suggesting that I watch interview clips of Theo Von. I still enjoy the comedy of Louis C.K., but I want a bit more from him. For two minutes he was the world's pariah; he's been busted and disgraced at a level granted to few mortals, a near-cosmic level, and he should tell us about it. Not just in a couple of jokes, which he's already done; not just with a lit-up SORRY sign behind him—but in a full set, a full blinded-by-the-darkness artistic reckoning with who he was and who he is now. Is that too much to ask?

Well, yes it is. There's no *should* in comedy. Louis C.K. will do what he wants. A bonus side effect of reading *Comedy Book*, of reading about all these comedians and their processes, was that I was cured, finally, of my sentimental attachment to the idea of the stand-up as truth-telling philosophe. Comedians love comedy. They love it more than anything else: more than truth, or people, or the vision of a more just society. That's what makes them comedians. It's a gift, a faulty chip, or a quirk of evolution. As Steve Harvey put it, talking to Jerry Seinfeld: "Tragedy strikes. I got news for you. We have the jokes *that night*." Comedy goes where the pain is—yours, mine, the comedian's, the world's—straight to it, because that's where the laughs are; because the laughs are pain, transmuted. Simple as that. Comedy has no responsibility. It never will. And we need it like air. *A*

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