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Funny Peculiar: Gershon Legman and the Psychopathology of Humor

Mikita Brottman

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Why are jokes funny? Why do we laugh? In *Funny Peculiar*, Mikita Brottman demurs from recent scholarship that takes laughter-- and the broader domain of humor and the comical--as a liberating social force and an endearing aspect of self-expression. For Brottman, there is nothing funny about laughter, which is less connected to mirth and feelings of good will than to a nexus of darker emotions: fear, aggression, shame, anxiety.

Brottman rethinks not only the mechanisms of humor but also the relation of humor to the body and the senses. To this end, she provides an engrossing account of the life and work of Gershon Legman, exiled author, publisher, and sexologist, Alfred Kinsey's first bibliographer, and legendary compiler of the dirty joke. Like Freud, Legman was convinced of the impossibility of understanding humor apart from sex, and Brottman shows how his two massive works on the subject, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke* and *No Laughing Matter*, provide a framework for understanding the ambivalent and often hostile impulses that underlie the comic impulse in its various guises. In lively and enlivening chapters, she traverses dirty jokes, the figure of the "evil clown" in popular culture, the current popularity of "humor therapy," changing fashions in stand-up comedy, and the connection between humor and horror. Brottman's sparkling prose, laced with wit, does not obscure the seriousness of *Funny Peculiar*. It is a thoughtful and wide-ranging elaboration of the Freudian claim that joking, in point of fact, is no laughing matter.

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