

# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley**  
has a good laugh.

**H**umour, like some kinds of wine, does not travel well. What is funny in one culture or language falls flat when transposed to another. So, although laughter is a universal human behaviour, what causes it is not. And, although humour causes us to laugh, we laugh for other reasons, too.

An early classic investigation into laughter was Bergson's *Laughter*, way back in 1900, and Koestler's *The Act of Creation* (1964) draws upon Bergson to make parallels between what causes laughter and what constitutes creativity. There has also been considerable speculation about the possible evolutionary value of laughter, and the benefits it has for our health (lower pain thresholds, better general physical health, strengthened immune system, etc). But in this column I am reporting on just a few of the very many titles which offer insights into humour itself.

## **Playing With Words**

*Playing with Words* by Barry Blake is an attempt to offer a view of the whole range of humour through word play. It is a somewhat unwieldy book, which attempts to cram into 170 pages virtually everything that might count as word play, including quite a lot which hardly counts as humorous. After an overview in

Chapter 1, the second chapter deals with things people joke about, including other ethnic groups (Irish jokes, Belgian jokes, etc), religion, politicians and, of course, sex and the relationships between the sexes, especially marriage. There is a good deal on language itself: Chapter 4 examines compounds, blends, prefixes, euphemism, etc; Chapter 5 deals with puns and Chapter 6 grammatical ambiguities; Chapter 9 is on language in context; Chapter 10 is on errors (slips of

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the tongue, malapropisms, spoonerisms, misinterpretations, etc); Chapter 11 looks at rhymes. In between, Chapter 7 attempts a typology of jokes, including cannibal jokes, blonde jokes, knock-knock jokes, graffiti, headlines, questions, oxymorons, etc. Inevitably, this falls far short of being comprehensive. There are, however, many, many examples of jokes throughout the book, and it is certainly a

useful sourcebook for anyone remotely interested in the subject of humour. But I felt it was somewhat superficial. The overloaded lark, in fact!

## **Stop Me If You've Heard This**

By contrast, Jim Holt's *Stop Me If You've Heard This* is a serious look at humour. The book is in two parts. In Part I, *History*, it traces the history of jokes back to classical times: in collections of jest-books, such as the *Philogelos* (fifth century AD), through Poggio Bracciolini's *Facetiae* of 1441 and the 18th-century *Joe Miller's Jests*. Many jokes prove to be very old, and are continually being elaborated or reinvented. There have been more recent collections of jokes, such as G Legman's *Rationale of the Dirty Joke* and Alan Dundes' *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. In Part II, *Philosophy*, Holt tackles the issue of theories of humour. Essentially, there are three: the Superiority theory (humour at the expense of others that makes you feel superior to them); the Incongruity theory (which places two incompatible frames of reference together, needing a flash of insight to perceive the humorous connection); and the Relief theory (where the humour helps people escape from their inhibitions). These days, most

commentators tend to favour the Incongruity theory, with its strong links to the creative spark in other fields. But others, such as Ted Cohen, refute the idea of a general theory completely: *'Every general theory of jokes known to me is wrong ... Such a monotonic theory always seizes upon one or two kinds of jokes, and misses the other kinds.'* This leads into a consideration of the different kinds of jokes: topical jokes, classic jokes, jokes about different groups of people, about musical instruments, geography, politics and national disasters. There are clean jokes and dirty jokes, intentional and unintended jokes, short ones and long shaggy-dog stories ... and, again, this typology leaves out as much as it includes. Holt discerns a shift over the centuries from initial lewdness and aggression towards puns and wit: *'What is fun is the way the incongruity of the punch line marks a defeat for a necessary tyranny: the tyranny of bourgeois morality in some jokes, of reason itself in others.'* The pleasure lies in *'... finding connections and contradictions where none were expected'*. This is a thought-provoking book, and if *'brevity is the soul of wit'*, it scores highly, with only 126 pages.

## The Naked Jape

Jimmy Carr, one of the two authors of *The Naked Jape*, is himself a stand-up comedian, and the book is written by 'enthusiasts, not academics'. Perhaps because of this, it is a more stimulating and engaging book than some of the others here. It is not only a book about jokes but also a joke book, with 450 jokes spread throughout its pages. Some of these are at the bottom of the pages, others at the end of each chapter. There are 12 chapters, dealing with different aspects of humour: the value it has, the role of clowns and jesters, children's humour, explaining how humour works, gender in humour, offensive jokes, ethnic jokes, the role of the court jester and censorship and persecution. There are highly quotable quotes throughout:

*'... a good joke can offer even the stuffiest of adults the opportunity to throw open an internal window on to the fresh, freewheeling creativity of childish imagination.'*

*'A joke defies definition, defies control, because it's a scrap of chaos pinned proudly to the lapel of the individual in defiance of society.'*

*'When the mouth is open for laughter, you may be able to shove in a little food for thought.'*

In the final chapter, a number of important points are reiterated about the seriousness of humour. *'The ability to choose to find the world funny is a powerful survival tool ...'* *'Jokes are a chink in the fundamentalist's armour.'* I highly recommend this book.

## Humour and laughter are essential markers of being human




## Laughing Matters

I don't normally refer to ELT books in this column, but I feel bound to mention Peter Medgyes' book *Laughing Matters*. It is unique in that it offers the teacher a rich selection of humorous material, together with a genuine sense of the importance of humour in language learning. As he himself says, *'... humorous texts and activities have to be light-hearted, as befits humour, and useful, as befits learning'*. He has also taken the trouble to spell out the potential advantages of using humour in language teaching. These include: providing authentic cultural information, offering genuine language contexts, bonding between class members, releasing tension and creating a relaxed atmosphere, promoting creative thinking, enhancing motivation and offering a welcome change from fixed classroom routines. The content is arranged into ten chapters, including *Jokes and wisecracks, Puns and puzzles, Proverbs and quotations, Poems and songs, Pictures and images, Stories and anecdotes, Sketches and dialogues, Errors and failures and Children and schools*. The material itself is well-chosen and genuinely funny, and the pedagogical framework of activities is both practical and useful to teachers wishing to introduce an element of humour into their teaching.



I have not mentioned the many aspects of humour encountered in English literature, but the names of Charles Dickens, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, P G Wodehouse, Jerome K Jerome, George Mikes, James Thurber, Mark Twain and Roald Dahl spring to mind, as

do the verse forms of the limerick, the clerihew and the cautionary tales of Hilaire Belloc. Neither have I discussed the more recent excursions into absurd and political humour in television or radio shows such as 'The Goon Show' (with Peter Sellers), 'Fawlty Towers' (with John Cleese), Jonathan Miller and Peter Cook in the Footlights revues, 'Yes, Minister', the Woody Allen films, and Rowan Atkinson as Mr Bean and Blackadder. These are all, to a large extent, a matter of individual taste; personally, I find Mikes, Jerome and Wodehouse deeply unfunny, whereas Wilde, Thurber and Dahl unflinchingly push the laughter button. Most also rely for their effect on the kind of shared cultural knowledge not possessed by most of our students – hence their omission.

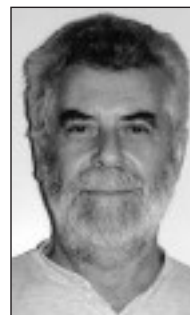
Humour and laughter are essential markers of being human. Perhaps our classrooms would be the better for drawing on them more than we sometimes do. 

### Featured books

- Blake, B *Playing with Words* Equinox 2007
- Carr, J and Greeves, L *The Naked Jape* Penguin 2006
- Holt, J *Stop Me If You've Heard This* Profile Books 2008
- Medgyes, P *Laughing Matters* CUP 2002

### Some other titles

- Baring-Gould, W S *The Lure of the Limerick* Panther 1974
- Bergson, H *Laughter* downloadable free from Gutenberg [www.gutenberg.org/files/4352-h/4352-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4352-h/4352-h.htm) 1900
- Jerome, J K *Three Men in a Boat* Penguin Classics 1999
- Koestler, A *The Act of Creation* Arkana/Penguin 1964
- Mikes, G *How to be an Alien* Wingate 1946
- Thurber, J *Fables for Our Time* Harper Colophon 1983
- Wodehouse, P G *The Inimitable Jeeves* Arrow Books 2008



**Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers.**

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