



Humor. Seriously.

HUMOR SERVES VERY REAL AND VERY IMPORTANT
PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS. HUMOR CAN
HELP US COPE, SAVE FACE, GAIN STATUS, TEST LIMITS,
OR BOND WITH OTHERS. IT ALSO PROVIDES A TOPIC
FOR SERIOUS RESEARCH BY A PAIR OF ASU ENGLISH
PROFESSORS AND THEIR COLLEAGUES AROUND THE WORLD.

BY JESSICA MCCANN

A Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew walk into a bar. Each orders a Screaming Orgasm cocktail...

BE HONEST, who just got a nervous batch of butterflies after reading that sentence? Feel an extra bit of tension, perhaps? After all, this is a university-produced magazine.

In a time when “political correctness” is the common rule, it’s reasonable to cringe, to wonder if this writer would dare follow through with such a set up, much less offer a punch line. And what if the joke was actually funny?

Humor can be a serious thing, and a joke can mean different things to different people in different circumstances. When used as a weapon, humor can wound, corrupt, and humiliate. Yet, when used as a tool, humor can establish rapport, educate audiences, and empower people.

Don and Alleen Pace Nilsen have spent the better part of their academic careers studying humor and its effect on culture and society. Both are professors of English at Arizona State University. Political correctness is just one of more than 100 topics they studied during background research for the *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor*. The new book is just one of the husband-wife team’s many professional collaborations.

“Humor serves very real and very important psychological and social functions,” says Don Nilsen. He and Alleen founded the International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS) during the 1980s. “Humor is a very positive and effective ego-defense mechanism. It can be used for coping, for saving face, for gaining status, for testing limits, for social control, and for bonding.”

As a society, most individuals have only a limited amount of time to make a point or connect with another person. The stand-up comic works to earn a laugh with his first joke. The college professor must spark an interest from her students during the first lecture. Writers labor to grab a reader in the first paragraph. The political candidate strives to inspire the masses within a sound-byte. Humor and wit often are the

means by which people quickly win over audiences. They also can be important tools of persuasion.

“Humor, satire, and irony are often used by a person who is being critical, but who does not want to offend,” he says. “Since these are interactive devices, they build solidarity between the speaker and his audience. People are usually not confrontational when they are part of the process.”

Political correctness is the idea that any language or action that could offend one’s political sensibilities should be eliminated. Political correctness stunts the many positive opportunities that humor has to offer. It is censorship that bans all stereotyping, ethnic jokes, religious humor and vulgarity. Censorship from the conservative Right says we mustn’t use profanity or joke about body parts, bodily functions, or religion. Censorship from the liberal Left spells out a whole different set of taboos, making gender issues and ethnicity entirely off limits.

“When this whole issue of political correctness first came up, we thought, uh-oh,” recalls Don Nilsen. “We’ve already been censored from the Right, and now we’re going to be censored from the Left, as well. What are we going to be able to say?”

Those who forbid such humor fail to understand just how prevalent it is. The Nilsens say that it can serve positive purposes.

For example, skilled speakers often use ethnic humor to challenge an audience’s assumptions and to surprise listeners by making them bump up against some of their own prejudices. Ultimately, the Nilsens contend, audiences are more receptive to lessons that come with a smile than with a scolding.

“Humor allows us to learn something, because when we’re laughing, we’re not defensive and our minds are open,” says Alleen Nilsen, who recently received a Lifetime Achievement Award from ISHS for her scholarship and service. “It’s kind of naïve of people to dismiss all stereotypes as bad, because they’re not. But we also have to take people beyond the stereotypes and teach them something new.”

ACCIDENTAL HUMOR

One type of accidental or unintentional humor is linguistic, such as in the form of misspellings or errors in logic. Headline writers, for example, are especially apt to create accidental humor because they are trying to attract attention and communicate a whole story in only a few words, as shown in these examples:

Dr. Ruth Talks about Sex with Newspaper Editors

Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge

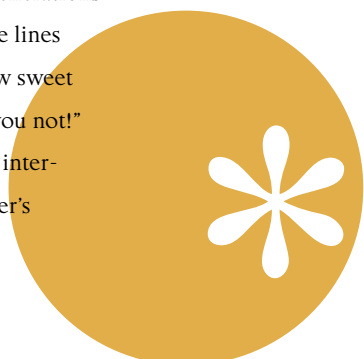
Defendant's Speech Ends in Long Sentence

Blind Woman Gets New Kidney from Dad She Hasn't Seen in Years

SLANG

Long before the days of mass media, slang was effectively spread by word of mouth. Modern mass media

can spread slang instantaneously around the world. *Yada, yada, yada, master of my domain*, and *it's in the vault* all made their way into popular culture through television's Seinfeld sitcom. *D'oh!* was adopted from cartoon character Homer Simpson's expression of disappointment or self-disgust. Earlier generations picked up such signature lines as Jackie Gleason's "How sweet it is!" Jack Parr's "I kid you not!" Arte Johnson's "Verrrry interesting!" and Gilda Radner's "It's always something!"



PUTDOWNS AND REJOINDERS

Put-down humor is best appreciated

when it occurs between people of equal status who respect each other and so can enjoy the teasing as a display of wit rather than meanness. Celebrity roasts succeed because the person being roasted is clearly respected. Snappy rejoinders are also funnier when the person on the receiving end has somehow "asked for it." When William Gladstone attacked fellow statesman Benjamin Disraeli in front of the British Parliament by saying that Disraeli would die "either on the gallows or of a horrible disease," Disraeli responded, "That depends on whether I embrace your principles or your mistress."



JOHN C. PHILLIPS PHOTO

EXCERPTS FROM
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
20TH-CENTURY
AMERICAN
HUMOR

INTERNATIONAL WORDPLAY

Most players of the Pac Man video game do not know

that its name comes from a Japanese slang word *paku-paku*. The word describes a person's mouth opening and closing while one eats. Others have not heard the story about the almost-as-popular Donkey Kong, which features an aggressive gorilla. According to the story, the Japanese manufacturer intended to name the game Monkey Kong in honor of King Kong, but confused a *d* for an *m*.

POLITICS AND HUMOR

Besides building a sense of community, self-deprecating humor can be effective

in disarming political foes if a candidate is able to beat his critics to the punch by making voters laugh about something that worries them.

John F. Kennedy countered those critics who charged that he had an unfair campaign advantage because of his family's wealth. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and read a fake telegram from his father: "Don't buy one vote more than necessary. I'll be damned if I'll pay for a landslide."

take my wife ...please

Like most couples, Alleen and Don Nilsen have shared a lot of laughs. But this husband-and-wife team has taken their love of laughter to the extreme. The ASU English professors have devoted 25-plus years to humor studies.

The two met in undergraduate school at Brigham Young University. Both later embarked on careers as English teachers that brought them to ASU in the 1970s. Their interest in humor studies developed out of desire to make their grammar lessons more interesting. They believed that students could learn as much—if not more—through language play and humor as they could through standard language lessons.

“Every joke is a miniature intelligence test that the class either passes or fails,” Don Nilsen explains. “They must therefore work very hard to catch on to the joke, and because of this they make a commitment to the learning process. If jokes and other humor are integrated carefully into teaching materials, it will make the courses more fun and more memorable. The punch line of a joke is a miniature epiphany.”

The Nilsens' interest in humor studies grew and eventually led them to organize an April Fool's Day humor conference at ASU in 1982.

“When we had the conference, we thought only those interested in language would come, because

that was our approach,” Alleen remembers. “Then came all these nurses and doctors, physicists and philosophers; and it was great to see so many people taking humor seriously.”

That conference would be the first of six consecutive international conferences hosted by the Nilsens and ASU. The meetings each featured as many as 300 presentations. From that root grew the International Society of Humor Studies. The Nilsens were among the founding members. Don has served as executive secretary of ISHS since its inception, and Alleen has been editor of the organization's quarterly newsletter since 1988.

The Nilsens liken their work in humor studies to the experience of tourists hiking the Grand Canyon—the further into it they get, the bigger it grows.

Today, the organization includes members from around the world. The annual meeting alternates between sites in the United States and other countries. In addition to language scholars, conference participants represent the fields of medicine, art, business, philosophy, anthropology, history, political science, social work, sociology, education, performance, and the physical sciences.

Jessica McCann

Many contemporary comedians and humorists have achieved fame and fortune by using ethnic humor and stereotyping—even vulgarity—to win over audiences. African-American comedians like Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Chris Rock get laughs from diverse audiences, often by teasing them about their prejudices. Humor writers such as Dave Barry and the late Erma Bombeck have parodied sex, marriage, and parenthood in ways that allow readers to laugh at the stereotypes and also see beyond them.

Of course, ethnic humor and stereotyping can range from playful teasing to hostile hate-speech. Therein lies the problem. “How humor is received depends on who you target. It depends on your attitude and your audience, it depends on many things,” says Don Nilsen.

Humor's effectiveness also depends largely upon its goal; whether it is intended as a tool or as a weapon. According to the Nilsens, jokes directed toward a particular group from an individual within that group are considered more palatable, even beneficial. Such humor can expand the horizons of the group and perhaps allow them to see themselves in an objective light.

However, humor that is from someone outside the group—especially from someone who is hostile toward them—tends to do the opposite. Such humor shrinks the horizons, makes the group smaller and more sensitive to criticism.

During its infancy, any particular group or movement is particularly sensitive to criticism, Don Nilsen explains. Still, to say that one should never poke fun at a particular gender, religion, or ethnic group is a discredit to them, he contends.

“When you say a group shouldn't be criticized or joked about, what you're really saying is they're not strong enough to take it,” he says. “By not teasing, you're making them invisible. But by teasing them, you're saying they're strong enough. They're your equal. They can tease back. It's empowering.”

Once a movement becomes secure enough to take criticism and accept teasing, it's an indication that it has grown, evolved, and gained strength

from its uniqueness. The Jewish culture is a prime example, says Don. Much of his research has focused on Jewish humor. The ASU scholar is a principal advisor for a three-hour documentary being produced for public television titled “A Gift of Laughter: Comedy and the Jews.”

Several pages of the Nilsens' encyclopedia are devoted to Jewish humor, its evolution, and its impact on American humor. It notes that while Jews constitute a small percentage of the U.S. population, they also comprise a large percentage of the nation's professional comedians.

Some famous Jewish comedians did not or do not use their religious background as fodder for their jokes. Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Jerry Lewis, and Roseanne Barr are examples. However, Woody Allen, Rita Rudner, Jerry Seinfeld and others frequently mine their heritage for material.

Comedienne Elayne Boosler, the Nilsens write, gives a new twist to an old Jewish stereotype when she jokes, “My brother's gay. My parents don't mind as long as he marries a doctor.”

The Nilsens' point out that the idea of political correctness began to take shape during the 1960s and 1970s, as people's social consciousness and general distaste for stereotyping grew. Yet, by the 1990s, the pendulum had already begun to swing back. As a result, “pc” had been around long enough to become fair game itself for America's comedians and humorists.

Consider recent television shows like Comedy Central's *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher. The show aspired to push its viewers' sensibilities to the max. Such is our need to laugh with others, even if it means laughing at ourselves. “We just can't get rid of humor,” Alleen concludes. “It's so basic to human life.”

So, exactly how many journalists does it take to screw in a light bulb? Four—one to change the bulb, and three to distort the facts.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF 20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN HUMOR (ORYX PRESS) WAS HONORED AS ONE OF 20 OUTSTANDING REFERENCE BOOKS IN 2004 BY THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HUMOR RESEARCH AT ASU, CONTACT DON L. F. NILSEN, PH.D., 480.965.7592, OR AILEEN PACE NILSEN, PH.D., 480.965.9577, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH. SEND E-MAIL TO DON.NILSEN@ASU.EDU OR TO ALLEEN.NILSEN@ASU.EDU