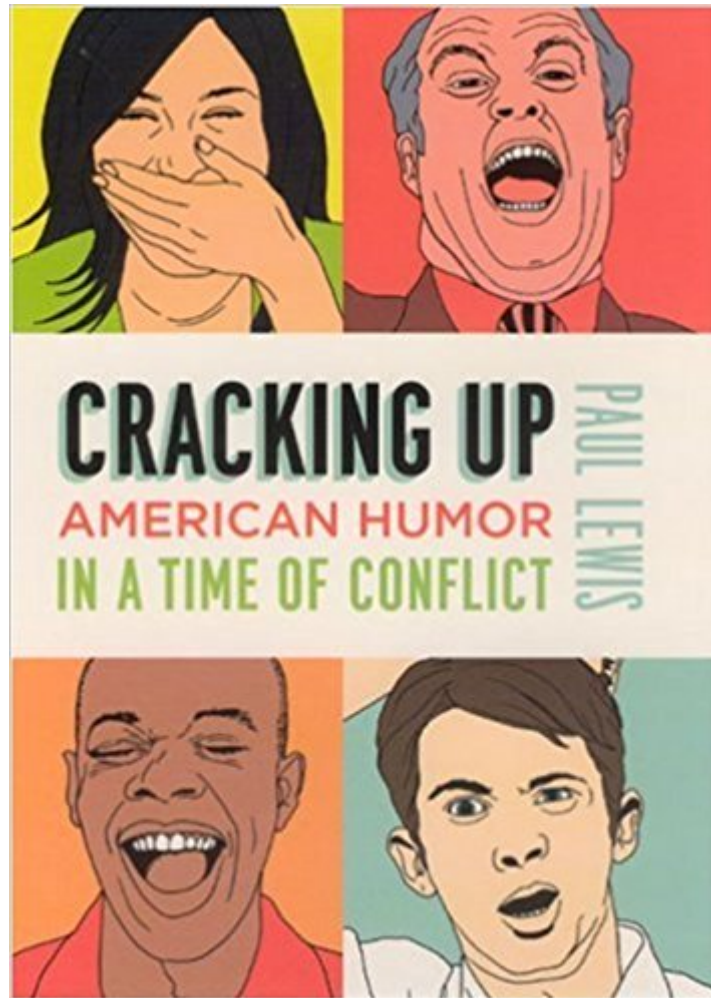




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Cracking Up: American Humor In A Time Of Conflict



Synopsis

What do Jon Stewart, Freddy Krueger, Patch Adams, and George W. Bush have in common? As Paul Lewis shows in *Cracking Up*, they are all among the ranks of joke tellers who aim to do much more than simply amuse. Exploring topics that range from the sadistic mockery of Abu Ghraib prison guards to New Age platitudes about the healing power of laughter, from jokes used to ridicule the possibility of global climate change to the heartwarming performances of hospital clowns, Lewis demonstrates that over the past thirty years American humor has become increasingly purposeful and embattled. Navigating this contentious world of controversial, manipulative, and disturbing laughter, *Cracking Up* argues that the good news about American humor in our time—that it is delightful, relaxing, and distracting—is also the bad news. In a culture that both enjoys and quarrels about jokes, humor expresses our most nurturing and hurtful impulses, informs and misinforms us, and exposes as well as covers up the shortcomings of our leaders. Wondering what's so funny about a culture determined to laugh at problems it prefers not to face, Lewis reveals connections between such seemingly unrelated jokers as Norman Cousins, Hannibal Lecter, Rush Limbaugh, Garry Trudeau, Jay Leno, Ronald Reagan, Beavis and Butt-Head, and Bill Clinton. The result is a surprising, alarming, and at times hilarious argument that will appeal to anyone interested in the ways humor is changing our cultural and political landscapes.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The recognition that humor can reflect horror or hope makes *Cracking Up* a worthy exploration of the consequences of a joke. Whether saving lives or humiliating the helpless, humor culture is

human culture." (Gary Alan Fine Common Review)"Lewis develops his analysis and arguments with specific references and examples enough to empower the reader to move out of the passive consumption of this humor and at least begin to understand critically one of the most baffling and important elements in American mass culture." (Dennis Hall Journal of American Culture)"Lewis provides a guide for thinking about humor with the seriousness it deserves." (Choice)

Paul Lewis is a professor of English at Boston College. He is also the author of *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*.

I know it sounds crazy, but anyone who loves horror needs to read this book. Trust me. The Intro alone sets a brilliant tone and clarifies that this is not just another rehash of the usual humor literature or a dry look at political jokes. The first chapter, "One, Two, Freddy's Coming for You" is one of the most insightful analyses of the teen slasher, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Chucky*, and serial killer flicks ever written in film or horror critique. "Freddy" then becomes a recurring theme as Lewis somehow manages to stay light by tossing bons mots into engaging discussions of pedophile priests, political correctness, Abu Ghraib, positive humor posers, and the worst president in modern memory. You'll laugh, shiver, get grossed out, and think.

who can forget Nixon's cameo on *Laugh-In*? pre-Watergate, the times were innocent and killjoys like Nixon could still garner a few yucks with a "sock-it-to-me." TV court jesters all stayed away from politics; that was one of the reasons most attributed to his banishment. Need more evidence: another brother, yanked for being too political. But nowadays, everything seems political--from news (Fox) to the late-night fare like Stewart, Leno, and Letterman. Here's a book that attempts to look into the cracked mirror of politics and laughter. Personally, I feel that most politicians have a tin ear, can't tell a joke well (Exhibit A: John Kerry a week before the midterm elections), engage in silly frat boy humor (Exhibit B: President Bush), or fail to see the efficacy and wisdom of tickling the funny bone of the vox populi. This book, a bit academic of course, is a refreshing survey of the comic landscape as it intersects with politics. Interestingly enough, I came across Lewis's book the same time I picked up copies of Martin Higgins' "The Nastiest Things Ever Said About Republicans" and "The Nastiest Things Ever Said About Democrats." Each book is packed with about 500 quotes mined from the mother lode of insult, jest, jibe, and joke that is so much a part of the American psyche. I now use Higgins' books as quick reference--and they properly bookend cracking up. Finally, as the partisan divide deepens in this country, we'll find ourselves looking to the funny men to keep us sane.

and balanced.

There is something both refreshing and disturbing about the fact that Jon Stewart's fake news show does the best job of reporting political news. One can have years of academic training in political science, read or skim five newspapers a day, and then turn on the evening news to discover that Brian Williams or Katie Couric have completely missed -- or misrepresented -- the most important story of the day; and then, later in the evening, Jon Stewart's irony-laden comedy show often gets the news of the day exactly right. How this situation came about and what it means for politics and our culture -- and how comedy is used to distract and inform and confuse and enlighten political discourse -- is only part of what this book covers, but that's plenty. I can think of no better treatment of this important subject.

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