
Review note by Gary Alan Fine.

Alvin Schwartz is a nice man. Anyone who cites his sixteen year old son in his footnotes qualifies as a nice man. However this is hardly the way to begin a review. To my own defense, readers, I argue that it is due to the nature of the book. The extent of Witcracks usefulness to folklorists consists entirely in the Notes, Sources, and Bibliography which accompany this joke book for America's malleable youth.

It should be made clear that the author succeeds in providing young people with a view of many genres of American jokes (notably, though not surprisingly, not dirty jokes) including shaggy dog stories, cruel jokes, puns, and nonsense humor. So folklorists might consider this collection for growing off-spring. However we must not allow this aspect of the work unduly concern us.

Witcracks is a somewhat minor addition to a jokelorist's library. Schwartz has read many of the recent articles and books on joke lore--both by folklorists, humorists, and scientists--and has culled from these sources the most appropriate juvenile gems. Thus the bibliography will present a reasonable though incomplete focus for the graduate student newly interested in humor, or for the bon vivant newly interested in folklore. And as they say, if even one person...

The five pages of notes are the most useful aspect of the volume for the folklorist. Schwartz briefly discusses the origin of each sub-genre in the volume (e.g. Wellerisms, Tom Swifties, or Little Moron jokes), providing little more than a paragraph-length precis of jokelore history for each sample. Schwartz also includes the source of each joke--most are from folklore articles or archives with an occasional few from popular journals (e.g. Esquire) or from relatives.

The folklorist is therefore advised not to take the volume's subtitle as an invitation to purchase a scholarly work--a point in no sense to the compiler's discredit, for he accomplishes what I presume is his aim: acquainting children with the American heritage of humor, surely a worthy goal. Hopefully this book will sell, but not to childless folklorists.