

Have You Read the World's Funniest Joke Book?

The Frog Jokebooks as Interaction Strategy

Moira Marsh

Indiana University Bloomington

Paper written for the American Folklore Society Annual meeting,

Oakland, CA

October 2015

David Henry Miller, known ubiquitously as “Frog,” has been compiling and selling joke books on the streets of Eugene Oregon for more than 25 years. To date his oeuvre consists of over 88 joke books—approximately 1,700 pages filled with narrative jokes, riddle jokes, and other comic forms. In 2012 Frog was voted the number one “Best campus personality” by students at the University of Oregon (Emerald Media 2012). The student newspaper has also Frog second, right after the University President, in the “Who’s Who at UO” list of “campus iconic characters” (Emerald Media 2010). UO students love him:

He stands on East 13th Avenue every day like a living landmark: long scruffy beard, beady eyes masked behind retro glasses, and a signature frog beanie. Equipped with a pair of army green rain boots and a sweatshirt with a dream catcher on the front, David Miller (more commonly known as Frog) pleasantly asks for the attention of students and faculty walking by, with a light yet emphatic voice that repeats the line: “Have you seen the funniest joke book the world has ever seen?” (“Campus jokester riddles Eugene,” Emerald Media 2012).

Today’s paper is an initial foray into a planned detailed case study of Frog and his joke books. Frog ekes out a living by doing odd jobs and relying on friends, but chiefly by selling joke books on the street in Eugene—especially on 13th Avenue, near the University of Oregon campus.

In a recent study Mike Lloyd and Bronwyn McGovern made an ethnographic case study of another iconic street person with a strong local following—Brother, or “Blanket Man,” in Wellington New Zealand and focused on his use of jokes to organize interactions with the public. (McGovern 2012):

"Homeless life on the street is tough and begging involves commonly understood power differentials. In Western societies, to be a beggar is to be at, or near, the bottom of the social hierarchy. ... We describe a homeless man living on the streets of Wellington who has no need to beg and who is often referred to as a local 'icon'" (Lloyd and McGovern 2008 @703). His street witticisms create "a sense of fun that flies in the face of the default reading of homelessness as a social problem" (Lloyd and McGovern 2008 @707).

Frog's strategies and his living situation are not identical to Blanket Man's, but both cases show the role of jokes in constructing a public identity and managing a successful albeit unusual lifestyle. Jokes are a part of the strategy for turning oneself into a local celebrity, a local character, or a "local icon," and this status in turn plays a role in how the community thinks of these individuals and responds to official actions against them.¹

Let us examine the joke books first.

Joke books are nothing new; it seems that every national literature includes them: *Philogelos* in ancient Greece, *The Forest of Laughter* in 2nd-century China; *Joe Miller's Jests* from 18th-century England, to name but a few (see Marzolph 1995; Dickie 2003). The Frog joke books resemble these others: they are compilations of jokes in various genres, copied from different sources and compiled into a *mélange*. In this literary form, the usual standards of originality, authorship, and copyright do not apply (Marzolph), as witnessed by Frog's frequent subtitle "recycled jokes by frog."

¹ Note that I am not using the term "humor" here; using "humor" in such expressions as "X uses humor to" or "the power of humor" betray a sloppy shorthand that obfuscates rather than enlightens. Instead, I force myself to specify which component of "humor" I am talking about, in this case, it is the joke books.

There are 88 Frog joke books to date. Each is between 12 and 20 pages in length, filled with typed (or photocopied jokes in various genres, copied, and stapled into heavy paper covers. Each one sells for three dollars (the joke books for kids are only two dollars). In the first volumes, Frog arranged the jokes into the same broad categories:

- 1: **Political Jokes:** what is Ronald Reagan's favorite vegetable? - James Brady.
- 2: **Dumb Jokes:** why did Humpty Dumpty have a great fall? - To make up for a rotten summer
 Why are there so many hippies living in Denver? - Because there are no jobs
- 3: **Religious Jokes:** Why can't J.C. eat M&Ms? – Because they keep falling through the holes in his hands.
 What does the INRI stand for on the crucifix? - I'm Nailed Right In.
- 6: **Tasteless and Sick Jokes:** Why weren't there any jokes made about Jones Town? – The punch lines were too long.
- 7: **Kids Jokes:** Have you heard the story about the peacock? – It was a beautiful tail.

The genres represented most frequently are riddle jokes, followed by narrative jokes. After a while, he began including a few cartoons, some original, some flagrantly copied. Recent volumes contain lengthy texts apparently copied wholesale from the Internet. Topical jokes drawn from current events regularly appear, such as the following from Volume 81, 2012:

Hurricane Sandy: did you hear about the new drink called the Sandy? - It's just a watered down Manhattan.

Pedophilia by Catholic priests: why do pediphiles (sic) like Halloween? - Free delivery;

Why are many choir boys hair parted in the middle? - For answer see Frog.

The joke book covers and titles reflect some frequently recurring preoccupations.

1. Religion: Frog Becomes Pope; the Crucifixion of Frog (14); The Resurrection of Frog; Frog goes to hell (28); the last supper of Frog (33); Frog goes to confession (35). Other religions are also treated: The Bris of Frog, the Bar Mitzvah of Frog (18); Frog Becomes a Jehovah's Witness; Frog goes to Mecca (23). Some of the jokes are original, such as the Declaration of Sins in

Volume 21, *Frog Becomes the Pope*:

Thou shalt not vote Republican,
 Thou shalt not accept inferior bud,
 Thou shalt not wake any sleeping homeless person
 Thou shalt not take the Frog joke books in vain;
 Thou shalt not pretend to like sushi (5)

2. Anti-Authoritarianism: Frog Gets a Time Out (59); Frog Takes a Dump on the White House Lawn; the execution of Frog (52) ; Eleventh Hour Stay of the Execution of Frog (53).

3 Disease and Insanity: Frog gets leprosy (47); Frog gets committed; or, the loony bin Frog [58]; Frog's screaming rubber cow gets the mad cow disease (66).

4. Bad Behavior: Frog eats his crayons (65); The frog jokebook for kids lights his farts (73); Frog Pops a Zit (24).

If the themes of the jokes he chooses reflect Frog's personality and opinions, he comes across as politically left-of center, counter-cultural, and anti-authoritarian. Religious hokery is a frequent target. The rights of the homeless, and the pleasures of marijuana are a jocular reflection of Frog's own lifestyle. ²

In terms of their production and distribution, the *Jokebooks by Frog* resemble the broadside literature popular from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Broadside were short compilations of text and images, produced on a small scale and sold on the street by peddlers. Frog's usual location is near the University of Oregon campus, where he has become well known. He has built a persona as a street eccentric, the contemporary equivalent of the court jester or fool. His colorful outfits even recall the fool's motley. In twenty-first century America, however, jesters are relegated to bounded spaces: circuses, comedy clubs, or television—where the dangers of the humorous mode may be regulated, kept within limits, and rendered safe. Street foolery is another matter, as Frog found out.

In 1990, after four years of peddling his joke books, Frog was cited for illicit sidewalk vending. The city of Eugene had an ordinance that prohibited street vendors, except those who sold food, drink, flowers, or balloons. The citation started a legal battle between Frog, represented pro bono by a local lawyer, and the city of Eugene. The case went on for four years, beginning with the

² Among this plethora of jokes, two joke targets are noticeably absent: ethnic groups and women. Frog is quoted as saying that he deliberately excludes racist and sexist jokes, because neither are funny. Like all "blanket "X is not funny" declarations, this is a moralistic statement rather than an aesthetic one, an expression of the speaker's attitudes and opinions. At the same time, it imputes attitudes, opinions, and moral failings on a hypothetical other who would find such jokes funny.

municipal court and ending in the Supreme Court of the State of Oregon. Headlines from two local newspapers tell the story.

The city was not objecting to Frog's jokes or his books, but to the fact that he was selling them on the street without a permit. Yet it is relevant that what Frog was peddling was *joke books*. If he had been selling bumper stickers, pencils, or any of the other things that street people sell on the street at various times to avoid the charge of merely begging, the local reaction to the case would not have been the same. For the local journalists, the jokes were the heart of the matter.

First, the joke book connection prompted writers to make jokes of their own in reporting the story: City law hops over frog; Frog gets jump on city; Frog could hop under the same exemption; frog makes career leap. Since a common way to signal support for a joke performance is to reply with more jokes, the puns and other jokes in the local papers, show that the writers support of Frog's joke books and of Frog himself.

The local stories of the case played upon a couple of common, related tropes: the David and Goliath motif and the "fighting City Hall" motif. "This is not a David vs. Goliath issue," said a city representative at one point (Lemmerman 1994), but the media thought otherwise. They depicted the contest as an uneven fight pitting the might of the City of Eugene against a penniless, harmless character—a frog, in fact. As the legal battle went on attention turned to the thousands of dollars that the city was spending in legal fees to pursue the case. Against this behemoth, a sometime-homeless street peddler looks small indeed.

The joke books were also a key ingredient in the construction of Frog's image:

“Frog...is headed for court because it's a crime to hawk humor on the sidewalk in Eugene.....Where else but Eugene could a 42year-old, ex-herbal-flea-collar salesman, who wears a Batfrog T-shirt and a tattoo of a dancing frog with a tambourine, be in trouble for selling joke books? (Bishoff, Register-Guard 1990)

In this image, jokes are assumed to be essentially harmless-just as the “just a joke” frame declared itself to be benign, and less than what it is. The depiction of the peddler with his motley dress reminiscent of a medieval court jester, and his absurd and equally innocuous former occupation, underlines the message that there is nothing dangerous here.

More than once, reporters covering the story suggest that Frog's jokes are not very good ones. "Frog's legal fights are funnier than his jokes," says one (Bischoff, 1994). The same writer declares that the solution to the standoff between frog and the city is simple: “Do nothing more,” he writes, “than declare Frog an official Eugene institution. And amend city code to allow an Official Institution to sell joke books anywhere. So long as he doesn't tell any in public” (Bishoff 1994). What makes Frog's jokes “bad” is not their transgression: the writers who make these comments refer only to the corniest jokes, those that are old, unoriginal, and obvious; those that rely heavily on puns—in other words, “groaners.” Such jokes mark a clear dividing line between Frog and professional comedians; he is no Lenny Bruce or George Carlin, the comments imply. To make this claim, the writers overlook the texts in the joke books that are obscene, tasteless, or blasphemous.

If Frog's jokes are bad and unoriginal, Frog himself is a folk character, an "irrepressible hawker of homespun joke books" as another journalist puts it (Bishop, 1994@1). Those who fight City Hal are of the people, the folk; their productions are handmade, "homespun," and thereby endowed with both virtue and innocence. How could homespun jokes be dangerous? How could bad, tired, old jokes threaten the social order? The implied answer is plain: they do not.

At the end of the day, Frog won this case both legally and in the court of local public opinion. The notoriety aroused by the four-year battle only helped to boost his sales. Frog collected the news stories about the case and republished them as one of his joke books: "Froggy Goes to Court, or A Brief History of the Uni Joker" –a punning reference to his usual haunt outside the University of Oregon and to the notorious domestic terrorist known as the Unabomber. The notoriety also cemented Frog's persona as a local character—an "Official Eugene Institution" as one reporter suggested.

The last story in the book describes a fun media event in which two DJs arrange for Frog to have a shampoo in a salon. As one bystander said, Frog is a "Eugene national treasure." So he is, and it is his jokes that made him so.

References Cited

- Bishoff, Don. 1990. "City law hops all over 'Frog'." *Register-Guard* (Eugene, Oregon), 9 March.
- Bishoff, Don. 1994. "Frog discovers new loophole." *Register-Guard* (Eugene, Oregon), 28 September.
- Bishop, Bill. 1990. "Court slaps fine on street vendor." *The Register-Guard*, 27 October.

- Bishop, Bill. 1990. "Judge backs vendor, strikes down city ordinance." *The Register-Guard*, 17 April 28.
- Bishop, Bill. 1993. "For street peddler 'Frog,' the joke's on Eugene law." *The Register-Guard*, 22 April.
- Bishop, Bill. 1994. "High court ruling favors 'Frog'." *The Register-Guard*, 1, 4A.
- Dickie, Simon. 2003. "Hilarity and pitilessness in the mid-eighteenth century: English jestbook humor." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37 (1):1-22.
- Eisler, Dan. 1991. "Frog turns himself in, officials say 'not yet'." *Oregon Daily Emerald*, 22 November, 1, 3.
- Frog. 1990. "More harassment by local cops." *The Student Insurgent*, March, 1, 5.
- Frog. 1998. *Froggy goes to court, or, A brief history of the Uni-joker*. [Eugene, Or.]: Frog Prints.
- Lemmerman, Randy. 1994. "One request yields many responses." *Oregon Daily Emerald*, 4 April, 1, 3A.
- Lemmerman, Randy. 1994. "Court overturns convictions ending legal battles for 'Frog'." *Oregon Daily Emerald* (Eugene, Oregon), 11 April, 1, p7.
- Lloyd, Mike, and Bronwyn McGovern. 2008. "Legendary life on the street: 'Blanket Man' and contemporary celebrity." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22 (5):701-14.
- Malach, Pat. 1991. "Frog hunting in the city courts." *Oregon Daily Emerald*, 12 May, 2-3.
- Marzolph, Ulrich. 1995. "Still the Same Old Jokes: The Continuity of Jocular Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century Egyptian Chapbooks." In *The Other Print Tradition: Essays on Chapbooks, Broad-sides, and Related Ephemera*, edited by Cathy Lynn Preston and Michael J Preston, 161-79. New York: Garland.

McGovern, Bronwyn. 2012. "Keepin' ya wits about ya: Organising street life interaction through humour." *New Zealand Sociology* 27 (2):96-116.

Moebius, Ben. 1994. "Frog makes career leap from peddling to promotion." *Oregon Daily Emerald*, 4 October, 1, p4.

Mortenson, Eric. 1994. "Hip hype and a frog shampoo, too." *The Register-Guard*, 22 October.

Silverstein, Sam. 1990. "Frog uses humor to send a message." *Oregon Daily Emerald*, 5 February, 1, p5.