

• Book Reviews •

Practically Joking. By Moira Marsh. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015. pp. xviii + 195, 6 black and white images, acknowledgements, introduction, references, about the author, index, index of practical joke examples).

In her introduction, Moira Marsh argues that the practical joke has previously been “considered too unsophisticated for serious attention,” but that this genre should be of particular interest to folklorists because of the discipline’s mindset that “creativity and artistry exist throughout society in humble everyday settings” (2). And indeed, Marsh’s close examination of various types of jokes (and specific examples) reveals a wealth of insight about the individuals, folk groups, and larger social groups involved. The joke tends to reveal various competing motivations on the part of the jokesters and complex reasons behind the ways that targets choose to respond.

Specifically, Marsh defends the practical joke against claims of primitive nature and cruelty: “It is a vernacular art form subject to critical evaluation by both practitioners and audiences, operating under the guidance of local aesthetic and ethical canons” (3). Thus the reader is introduced to the world of the practical joke, where there are a variety of forces in play, and they all depend on the social context of a particular joke. Anticipating that some readers believe that practical jokes are cruel, Marsh argues that, while most do operate on the basis of aggression, the leap to cruelty or hostility is a long one. She concludes her introduction by defining how she sees her own role: “to find out how jokes behave in the wild” (4).

Marsh’s analysis is guided by a few key questions: How can we define practical jokes in a way that encompasses the enormous genre but also provides framework for considering its significance? What does the joke target’s responses reveal about the dynamic of his or her relationship to the trickster? What purpose(s) do practical jokes serve in folk groups and communities? Marsh’s analysis rests primarily upon the benign violation theory of humor, in which the viewer sees that a joke transgresses some social value or norm, but can also accept

that transgression temporarily. Her definition of practical jokes is also central to the aims of the book: “A practical joke is *a scripted, unilateral play performance involving two opposed parties—trickster and target—with the goal of incorporating the target into play without his or her knowledge, permission, or both*” (12, emphasis in original). This definition informs the majority of her points about the rhetoric of the practical joke and the social dynamics that influence it.

In Chapter 1, Marsh sets forth her definition of practical jokes as “forms of unilateral play,” leaning on previous work by Erving Goffman, Richard Bauman, and Richard Tallman (12-13). Chapter 2 includes a catalog of types of pranks or practical jokes: the put-on, the leg pull, the fool’s errand, the kick me, the booby trap, the stunt. This catalog provides a working vocabulary for the reader, which Marsh will later use to discuss differences between types of practical jokes as they illustrate the concepts she explores. Chapter 3 is the tale of a particular practical joke: a group of reporters send one of their own to catch a big scoop—a nonexistent drug bust. Marsh analyzes the way several people involved in the joke explained it afterward—the joker, the target, and several bystanders. She compares the ways in which these speakers represent the motivation, the crucial moments, and the success of the joke, relying in part on Labov and Waletzky’s model of the personal experience narrative.

Chapter 4 takes a slightly different direction, exploring the genre of the practical joke and its relationship to truth. Marsh compares the practical joke to the legend in this regard: “the practical joke is based on differential knowledge, whereas the legend is based on differential belief” (45). In Chapter 5, we return to the aforementioned accusation that practical jokes are inherently cruel and deceptive. In response, Marsh examines practical jokes that serve as solutions to “social dilemma[s],” like pranks played on an inconsiderate coworker (58). She defends the aggression of the practical joke as a legitimate means by which social groups can enforce group values.

Chapter 6 turns to the response of joke targets. Marsh differentiates simple laughter from humor support, which expresses not only amusement (or not), but

also approval of the transgression of social norms, which is always present in some form in a practical joke. It is here that Marsh introduces the benign violation model, in which humor is neither inherently cruel, nor simply a felt response to incongruity, but is a temporary acceptance of the social norms transgressed by the joke. Unlaughter, then, is not just the absence of laughter but an implicit accusation against the transgression performed by the joker. Chapter 7 includes a rhetorical consideration of the various ways that a target might respond to a practical joke: laughter, responding with more jokes, aestheticizing the joke (expressing appreciation for its artfulness).

In Chapter 8, Marsh explores the ways in which the preexisting relationship between joker and target both shapes and is shaped by the target's response to the joke. In some contexts, targets are not expected to seek revenge; in others, continual pranking between friends is the norm. Chapter 9 considers how various initiation pranks (for example, wedding pranks and hazing) "police the boundaries between the individual and the collectivity" (116). Like other practical jokes, pranks reaffirm group norms during individual rites of passage; hazing introduces newcomers to the hierarchy and values of the group. Chapter 10 shifts our focus to public pranks, like journalist's spoofs (fake news stories) and university students' pranks (in which the public is the target).

Chapter 11 takes an altogether different turn, offering in-depth profiles of 4 practical jokers—two individuals and a married couple. Marsh interviews the jokers, examining their approaches, styles, where they learned to value and play practical jokes, how they describe those jokes after the fact, who they play jokes on, and why. The book ends not with a conclusion but with a section entitled "Post-Play," in which Marsh reflects on the implications of her work and expresses her hope that this non-conclusion might actually be the first step toward another book on the topic; she is happy to pass the torch to other researchers.

Throughout the book, Marsh returns to a few key themes. Firstly, practical jokes are transgressive, but productively so, either pointing out incongruities or

expressing the norms of a social group. Another recurring theme, this one of particular interest to the folklorist, is that the joking context is expansive, reaching far beyond the time frame in which the joke occurs and the relationship between the joker and target.

This book, Marsh's first, provides useful coverage of different types of jokes, particularly for a newcomer to humor study. Her analysis of the rhetoric of humor support also provides an interesting linkage between rhetoric and humor study; scholars in both fields would benefit from reviewing her work. As a whole, the book provides an excellent defense of the practical joke as a thoughtful and artful act that responds to and reinforces group dynamics.

It is only one book, of course, and while more detail on each topic would be welcome, one area in particular seems ripe for further work. The in-depth profiles of jokers in Chapter 11 are fascinating, but even more depth and context might be more useful. What Marsh does with these profiles—looking at larger and larger contexts to help understand what the practical jokes are doing—could easily be expanded into another book. Folklorists in particular would be interested in a study of individual tricksters, perhaps with detailed analyses of particular joke stories, using the terminology and approaches of the folklore discipline.

Marsh certainly redeems the practical joke; her application of theory to this under-examined genre makes a strong case for further study in this area. Bridging the gap between humor theory and folkloristics, Marsh encourages a particular approach to humor study that will only become more useful as scholars continue to examine the effects of mass media and social media on folk group humor practices. While somewhat limited in geographical scope, the book provides a strong introduction to the folkloristic approach to jokes and offers a well-rounded view of the genre of practical jokes.

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