What’s the deal with stand-up comedy? Is it a pre-packaged object of popular culture or representative of a living tradition and folk performance? Stand-up comedy incorporates many recognized forms of folklore, like jokes and storytelling, but is uniquely modern in its transmission through live recordings rather than just in-person performance. Ian Brodie, Associate Professor of Folklore at Cape Breton University, explores this tension throughout *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-up Comedy*. Brodie describes stand-up comedy as a genre of speech and performance, a “vernacular form of talk,” that hinges on the performer’s ability to create intimacy with the audience—even in its most mediated forms. Throughout *A Vulgar Art*, Brodie elaborates on this premise by demonstrating ways in which stand-up fosters intimacy on stage, as well as in its recording and distribution.

Brodie’s analysis of stand-up comedy spans the gulf between folklore and popular culture, addressing the spectrum of performances from the local open mic show to nationally distributed comedy specials by the likes of Chris Rock and George Carlin. Although the latter form of stand-up is heavily mediated through “official” commercial institutions, Brodie’s analysis remains “entrenched in the disciplinary perspectives of folkloristics.” In *A Vulgar Art*, Brodie expands on existing folk humor research, laying
the groundwork for approaches to mediated humor content that go beyond textual analysis and incorporate a range of individual performances.

Brodie’s interdisciplinary research draws on a combination of fieldwork and mass-distributed popular culture texts. His analysis draws on observations of live performances at local comedy clubs, extensive interviews, and commercial recordings of stand-up routines and news coverage. As part of his research, Brodie accompanied Canadian comedian Ron James on a tour of Nova Scotia to inform his discussion of the individual performer's identity, style and personal experiences. While James’ work occasionally helps illustrate regional comic traditions like Canadian maritime humor, Brodie often uses his fieldwork to connect live stand-up performances with broader, mediated productions. Transcriptions of performances by acclaimed comedians like Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor are peppered throughout the text, inserted like poetry verses and marked by Brodie’s meticulous notation used to indicate non-verbal aspects of performance such as intonation and audience reactions, demonstrating Brodie’s attention to the words of comedians—both on- and off-stage.

* A Vulgar Art is arranged thematically, interweaving analyses of popular performances by mainstream comedians, interviews with comedians, and observations of stand-up shows. Part One, billed as “The Opener: From Folk Talk to Stand-Up,” acts as a survey of the field of popular culture studies and folklore as they relate to stand-up comedy. In Chapter One, “Stand-Up Comedy and a Folkloristic Approach,” Brodie outlines various disciplinary approaches to stand-up, points out their limitations, and calls for examination of stand-up that goes beyond the words to examine context. (19)
Part Two, “The Middle: Creating Intimacy Over Distance,” features Brodie’s analysis of stand-up as a performance by bringing historical material, interviews, and descriptions of routines into conversation with the conceptual framework he sets up in Part One. Chapter Two, “Where is the Stand-Up Comedian?: Stand-Up on Stage,” sets the scene and draws attention to the material aspects of the show including the staging, brick backdrops, and the microphone. By contrasting stand-up events with live comedy stage shows of the past, Brodie argues that most of these elements help create a sense of intimacy that is necessary for their success. Chapters Three, Four, and Five (“Who is a Stand-Up Comedian?: The Social Identity,” “Who is This Stand-Up Comedian?: The Performance of Self,” and “What is the Stand-Up Comedian?: Intimate Other”) expand on the positioning of the comedian as a persona, public figure, and subject within stand-up as a performative art. This section addresses the narrative style of stand-up, the role of occupational identity, and the formation of audience-comedian rapport, drawing on transcriptions of performances and interviews.

Part Three, “The Headliner: Distance Increases” expands the scope of the analysis to address the mediation of performance, with Chapters Six and Seven descriptively titled “Stand-Up Comedy Broadcasts” and “Stand-Up Comedy Recordings.” This section demonstrates the repetition and variation in forming comedic bits and explores the underlying appeal of listening to live recordings. A helpful “Discography and Videography” section is included after a brief conclusion for readers interested in the performances cited throughout the text.
The range of material collected for *A Vulgar Art* reflects the book’s thematic goals by bringing together the emergent traditions of comic performance with the mass-mediated recordings that brought stand-up to the public. To that end, *A Vulgar Art* delivers less analysis of jokes and humor, and more analysis of the performances in context. Brodie provides a close analysis of many traditions embedded in stand-up and makes a strong case for the use of folklore analysis, even if his discussion of stand-up in its commercial form and the power structures that dictate production, distribution, and consumption, is less developed. Brodie’s unique organization and broad approach demonstrate his commitment to a truly multi-dimensional analysis of stand-up comedy.

Like stand-up comedy itself, *A Vulgar Art* bridges the worlds of popular culture and folklore, packing in plenty of historical context and popular references along the way. With its significant theoretical engagement and interdisciplinary appeal, *A Vulgar Art* is suitable for any academic audience with an interest in contemporary verbal arts, folk performance, or the world of popular comedy, starting in the 1970s through 2000s. For folklorists, Brodie’s contributions provide insight about the nature of comedy and open the way for further work analyzing mediated performances in popular culture. As comedians increasingly rely on social media, podcasts and streaming video, the impact of technology on stand-up as a performance genre continues to evolve, giving folklorists a unique opportunity to expand the field’s understanding of these cultural relationships.

ANAMARIE O’BRIEN

*Pennsylvania State University*