Putting the Supernatural in Its Place is an insightful look at how supernatural lore dynamically influences the spaces we inhabit, through a varied and appealing range of spooky subjects.

Benjamin Radford  
Center for Inquiry, Buffalo NY


Although jokes and anecdotes have been regarded by most folklorists internationally as one of the most widespread proscript folkloric forms of the twentieth century, scholarly study of these genres in this period never received academic attention comparable to that received by contemporary legends since the 1960s and, especially, since the 1980s. This paradox will be definitively investigated by future historians of the field; although many important studies on jokes have been written by folklorists, solid book-length studies, especially ones which could provide new theoretical approaches to joking, were, until recently, strangely absent. The reason for such neglect is obvious in the case of the former Communist countries; although local folklorists recognized the importance of studying jokes, it was politically problematic to study contemporary vernacular humor, which was very often critical of the ruling regimes and/or of official ideology. Local folklorists thus usually turned to the study of historical layers of traditional rural or urban humor, neglecting vibrant contemporary traditions. It is not surprising, then, that one of the first studies mentioning “Radio Yerevan” jokes, popular all over the former Soviet bloc, was written by U.S. folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand in 1972. In my own academic context of the former Czechoslovakia, the first folkloristic studies on contemporary jokes did not appear until the mid-1970s, written by legend scholar Oldrich Sirovatic, (who, however, absolutely neglected the most popular political jokes). This attitude changed—globally—in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and then especially in the new millennium, when scholarly interest in vernacular humor gained momentum. In addition to many annotated collections, several new theoretical approaches appeared, most notably those propagated by Christie Davies (1990; 1998; 2011), and by the post-semiotic investigations of several Russian folklorists adhering to the concept of “postfolklor” (“postfolklore”).

The present volume, written by distinguished U. S. folklorist—and leading humor scholar—Elliott Oring, takes this renewed interest in vernacular humor to a completely new level. Although historically there have been several theoretical approaches to joking that could be labelled specifically “folkloristic” (i.e. they were created by experts in this field; one can name for example several German folklorists, such as Hermann Bausinger and Hannsjoef Lixfeld), the majority of folkloristic research on jokes has drawn heavily on classical theories of humor developed in psychology (most notably from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud from 1905), in literary theory (e.g., Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman), and especially in philosophy. In Oring’s new book (his fifth volume on humor, if I count correctly) he also discusses these classical theories (and much more than these—he investigates almost every importancet contribution to humor studies, drawing also from anthropology, linguistics and other fields), but in an incomparable analytic way, encompassing a critical evaluation of the most recent developments in humor studies. Building on his previous humor scholarship, Oring investigates four major generalist theoretical positions in the study of humor: a “general theory of verbal humor,” a “conceptual integration theory,” a “benevolent violation theory,” and a “false-belief theory,” (in chapter 2, “Parsing the Joke: General Theory of Verbal Humor and Appropriate Incongruity”; chapter 3, “Blending and Humor”; chapter 4, “On Benevolent Violations”; and chapter 5, “Humor and the Discovery of False Beliefs,” respectively). More importantly, he brings his own (very strong) conceptual frame to the understanding of joking, first formulated in the early 1990s. This is his “appropriate incongruity theory,” according to which the humor is based on “the perception of an appropriate interrelationship of elements from domains that are generally regarded as incongruous”; the humor effect is thus based “on perceiving a conflation of incongruous words, behaviors, visual forms, or ideas that nevertheless seem appropriately related” (x). The appropriate incongruity theory was, as the author himself notes, as a notion (or in its nascent form), formulated by his predecessors as early as the late eighteenth century; however, Oring defines and defends this approach in such a compelling way that it is very hard (at least for me) not to agree with his standpoint.

Other chapters of the book are devoted to more specific problems connected with jokes and joking. Especially illuminating is the author’s initial discussion of Freud in chapter 1, “What Freud Actually Said About Jokes.” I find it eerily bizarre—and, perhaps appropriately, also very funny—how many noted humor scholars grossly misinterpreted Freud’s pioneering work (I could easily add a few more names from Eastern and Central Europe, too).

Also very useful is the author’s detailed analysis in chapter 7, “Risky Business: Joking in Repressive Regimes.” This specific kind of joking discourse is among those most thoroughly investigated by contemporary
of internet humor studied under the label of “digital folklore”), maybe we are witnessing the advent of a new field of humor studies, in which folklorists’ voice will be more strongly heard.

References


Petr Jančárek
Charles University


From Perrault to the Brothers Grimm, folk and fairy tales have long been employed for pedagogical purposes. While such tales found an early role in universities as teaching tools and research items, there was little expansion of their use until, as Donald Haase discusses in the forward to New Approaches to Teaching Folk and Fairy Tales, “the study of folktales and fairy tales . . . took a radical turn in the 1970s and 80s, a turn that reinvented, revitalized, and expanded the field across disciplines” (vi). Such expansion led to the demand and development of university classes entirely focused on and based in fairy tales and folktales. Yet, despite the greater interest, teachers wishing to design their own courses were left mostly to their own devices, as there was and still is “relatively little publicly, in print or otherwise, about teaching folktales and fairy tales” (vi). Seeing this lack in the discipline, Christa C. Jones and Claudia Schwabe have produced a much-needed guide in their seminal work New Approaches to Teaching Folk and Fairy Tales.