Elliott Oring’s *Joking Asides* is a much needed, if slightly retreaded, entry into the field of critical humor studies. Oring was one of the first scholars to bring humor theory to American scholarship, particularly as something other than a subset of psychoanalysis. Although Oring did begin his career writing about Freud and Freud’s foundational *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, as an anthropologist and folklorist, Oring offered a different reading of Freud, and his *Jokes and their Relations* blended Freud with social science (Oring 1992). *Joking Asides* is an extremely readable and teachable volume, in which Oring continues to do invaluable work in making humor theory useful to contemporary scholars in a variety of disciplines.

Oring admits that “nothing is likely to be definitively resolved in the study of humor, least of all by this collection of essays,” and he is right that this volume is not offering any new theoretical approaches to humor (ix). *Joking Asides* bears more resemblance to D. H. Monro’s *Argument of Laughter* than it does to Oring’s earlier work in that it is largely a synthesis of existing humor theories. The book can be broken roughly into two sections. Chapters one through five address the staple theories of humor and highlight both the good and bad elements of each theory. Chapters six through twelve are more focused on case studies or specific applications of humor theories to particular situations, with special focus on the political and the social.

Chapter one is a concise, and much needed companion to Freud’s work. In this chapter, Oring’s greatest contribution may be in offering a different interpretation of what jokes’ relation to the unconscious actually is. Freud’s claim that joke-work is similar to dream-work has caused many interpreters to read Freud’s book through the lens of the unconscious. Oring argues instead that “nothing about jokes is truly unconscious except for the means by which a joker converts a thought into the form of a joke” (15). Chapter two approaches incongruity and verbal humor, and chapter four deals with benign violation humor. These, along with superiority, relief, and defense mechanism, are the primary theoretical models for
analyzing the craft of humor, so what Oring offers are new ways to think about old categories. In chapter four, he specifically complicates Henri Bergson’s classic idea that real emotion is the enemy of laughter (Bergson 2008). Oring argues that emotion can be, but is not necessarily always, a factor in understanding humor and believes that they very violence of benign violations is what makes them good examples of the relationship between humor and emotion. Oring writes that, “when BVT commits to the notion that emotion necessarily underpins all these cognitive categories and is responsible for the sense of amusement,” it highlights the way that “one can easily factor emotion into the humor equation in any number of instances” (80). Arguing for emotion as something that makes the humor as opposed to the enemy of humor brings humor theory and affect theory into conversation with each other, which may be the most exciting potential theoretical application of this volume.

Chapters six through twelve are less concerned with humor theory and more concerned with the relationship between humor and politics. This section begins with a case study of Borat and continues on to discuss political jokes in repressive regimes (a chapter which may find more application for scholars now than when it was published), Internet humor, “narrative jokes,” Jewish jokes, jokes and art, and finally “contested performance and joke aesthetics.” This is where Oring may be making the largest original contribution with this volume, as he claims that “of all the aspects of humor that have been addressed...the aesthetics of humor generally, and the joke specifically, have perhaps attracted the least attention” (199). Here, Oring moves away from the intent behind jokes or the cultural context of jokes and focuses on the linguistic act of speaking a joke. What he is calling “aesthetics” has long been a part of the science of humor. The old vaudeville theory that words with a “k” sound are naturally funny is a simpler explanation, while the 2015 study in the Journal of Memory and Language entitled “Telling the World’s Least Funny Jokes: On the Quantification of Humor as Entropy” is more complicated, and Oring’s aesthetics of humor sits somewhere in between. It offers another way to think about how the language itself, the phonemes that make up a joke, matter as much if not more to our response to a joke than does the content of the joke itself.

Overall, Joking Asides’s greatest value is likely to be in the classroom. The length of the chapters makes them easily assigned on any
undergraduate syllabus, and the lack of a narrative or theoretical through-line to the volume means little is lost in excerpting a short section. That could also be the volume’s weakness, as those who have been waiting for Oring to add a new dynamic to the field will likely be a bit disappointed in the synthetic nature of much of this book. But where it is breaking little new ground, it is offering humor scholars a valuable resource in contextualizing some of the long-standing theoretical cornerstones of the field.

Works Cited


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There is an ever-growing field concerned with the study of video games as a form of history. Significantly, *Digital Games as History* represents the first single-authored work to propose a formal framework for approaching and thinking about this topic. Adam Chapman brings together various strands of academic and public discourse, mapping opinions and trends that help to conceptualize and understand the way games can be seen to represent “the past,” as well as engage with older forms of history.

*Digital Games as History* is both accessible and interdisciplinary, bringing together a significant array of work in game studies, historiography, and wider theory, historical or otherwise. Synthesizing them