nior researchers may be able to rely on the overview as a sobering roadmap if they find themselves in a leadership role on a large international interdisciplinary multi-year project.


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I am writing this in the weeks following the 2016 presidential election. Amidst the news reports and online calls for both support and denunciation, one of the more charming vernacular responses to have emerged is the “Pranking Joe Biden” meme cycle, featuring the outgoing vice president telling President Barack Obama his plans for a series of pranks, practical jokes, and booby traps for the incoming Trump administration. Among the many variations, Biden shows the president-elect an Etch A Sketch that he calls a remote control for drone strikes; Biden changes the White House Wi-Fi password to “ILoveMexicans” or “PssyGrbbr45”; he leaves behind false evidence of Obama’s Kenyan and Muslim heritage; and he wants to hold hands with Obama “to freak [the ostensibly anti-LGBTQ vice-president-elect] Mike Pence out.” In addition to Biden’s reputation for earthiness (and Trump’s reputation for self-grandeur), this meme cycle builds on a tacit understanding of the practical joke: as play, as disruptive without being destructive, as associated with passages (and the rites thereof), as a deliberate breach to another’s presentation of self, and as a performance of and about power. At this precise moment in history, and within this imaginary, the practical joke is a—and maybe the—legitimate response.

Moira Marsh’s *Practically Joking,* refreshingly without subtitle, is the culmination of almost 30 years of researching and theorizing one of the least-lauded of folk forms. Her definition of the practical joke (“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” [p. 12]) is broad enough to incorporate a number of performances without losing definitional integrity. Her use of “target” as opposed to “victim” or its analogues shifts the tone from the joke being an inherently hostile act and the focus from the act as completed to the act in potency. This is affirmed further by her use of “scripted”: the joke is effective if it “[runs] in a way that the jokers can plausibly claim is in line with what they expected to happen” (p. 16). The script need not be particularly involved: for example, when you momentarily stand up, I remove your chair, anticipating that you will sit down again with the assumption that the chair has not disappeared.

The target completes the performance produced and directed by the joker. In her chapter on “The Types of the Practical Joke,” Marsh identifies the simple “put-on” as requiring only some indication that the target has accepted as true some deliberate falsehood. A “fool’s errand” requires action, often including discomfort and the target soliciting assistance from others; a “kick me” alters the target’s presentation of self and moves him or her through the public sphere; and a “booby trap” alters everyday places and objects and requires the target to engage with them. With a “stunt,” the target is the public: whether a put-on such as fake news reports on April Fools’ Day or a fool’s errand such as official-looking notices from town councils requiring immediate action, any specific unwitting participant is but one of a more-or-less undifferentiated mass.

In 10 brisk chapters, Marsh moves the reader along two trajectories, both of them responses to the standard arguments against the practical joke and/or its serious study: that it is primitive and that it is cruel. To the first, she clearly shows that while some jokes may be lacking in complexity (like my chair-removal example above), others are highly elaborate, well-planned, and in many ways elegant performances, as determined not simply by Marsh’s assurances but through the assessments of the audiences and, in many instances, of the targets themselves. An implicit additional counter-argument to the
charge of “primitivism” is that practical jokes are not relegated to an “Othered” stratum of society but are part of the joking culture of, inter alia, university faculty, journalists, and seminar- ians. Marsh has internalized the “folk is us” shift of the last 50 years of American folkloristics, but every now and then, it is good to remind ourselves that remnants of a “folk is them” paradigm are still operative outside the discipline.

One could argue that much of the book responds to the charge of inherent “cruelty” often leveled against the practical joke: by definition, it is a performance of a (temporary) power differential, as the joker at least takes advantage of knowing that there is play occurring, while the target does not. As an isolated act, abstracted from its context, this display and exercise of power could be interpreted as cruelty or hostility. But, Marsh reminds us frequently, it occurs within extant relationships within joking cultures, in which there is not so much a repertoire of established joke scripts (although one can easily point to “the tin-foiled desk,” “short-sheeting,” or “knick knock” as examples of the same) but rather a canon of acceptable transgressions. Play has rules, and when the play act is understood as operating within those rules, the joke is not only effective but also successful.

This distinction between the effective joke and the successful joke is critical for addressing the charge of cruelty, as cruelty is an emic evaluation related to a joke’s success: target and audience (who are sometimes one and the same) grasp not only that the target “fell for it” by acting according to expectations, thus making the joke effective, but that the joke itself meets the individual’s and the collective’s criteria for it being a mere joke. Marsh twice invokes Gregory Bateson’s definition of play, “the playful nip that denotes the bite but does not denote what the bite denotes” (pp. 66, 97): when the nip is instead taken to denote the bite, the joke is not a success. In a section on hazing, with the specific example of an office initiation prank that was considered harassment by the target and subsequently confirmed as such by a rights tribunal, she delicately lays out, without descending to ethical relativism, the argument about context familiar to folklorists.

One aspect of Marsh’s work that should be foregrounded and celebrated is how she never lets us forget that—however much one can speak of the function of jokes in terms of building community or the mechanics of humor in terms of highlighting cultural incongruities—there is a beauty to play that defies rationalization because it is not a faculty of reason. “Play is fun,” she reminds us, “and that is all the reason we need to do it” (p. 151). To that end, in addition to being a natural contribution to both humor studies and folklore scholarship, this book should also find a place in the conversation on aesthetics.

Quilts and Human Rights. By Marsha MacDowell, Mary Worrall, Lynne Swanson, and Beth Donaldson; foreword by Desmond Tutu. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. Pp. xviii + 210, foreword, preface, acknowledgments, 105 color photos, notes, bibliography, index.)

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Winner of the 2017 Chicago Folklore Prize, Quilts and Human Rights beautifully highlights the individual and collective voices of fiber artists who have recorded histories with fabric, thread, and needles. The book complements a Michigan State University Museum travelling exhibit of the same name to present a moving survey of quilts made to protest human rights violations, document social justice initiatives, or memorialize and share personal stories of inequality, abuse, death, or struggle. Similarly to the objects it documents, the book transcends a singular representation to reveal multifaceted and complex stories stitched in and with traditional forms.

With its extensive gallery of quilts, the catalog bears witness to individual and group material responses to issues of human rights. The authors framed their selection process by using the United Nations’ International Declaration of Human Rights, which holds that all humans have the right to live and express themselves freely. The quilts raise awareness and share stories as objects of activism, banners of protest, records of events, and symbolic representations of experience. Additionally, the authors note...