Although I considered including a prank in the course of this review, this text is spoof-free. Admittedly such a claim, as Moira Marsh, the long-time folklore librarian at Indiana University, will recognize, almost guarantees a jest’s inclusion. Believe it or not.

Books that explore the frivolous must overcome what the folklorist Brian Sutton-Smith once proclaimed as the triviality barrier. In the case of practical jokes, Marsh has a high hurdle. Such mockery is trifling in its double meaning: trifling for society and trifling with people’s reputations. Perhaps this is why at a time in which every topic can point to its own discipline, Marsh has written the first scholarly book that treats the prank seriously, explored up and down, inside and out. Some books have arguments, while others have topics, and Practically Joking is proudly one of the latter. By the end of the text, a reader has been exposed to “thirteen ways” of looking at a practical joke. Perhaps this text lacks the poesy of Wallace Stevens’s inventory of a blackbird, but one cannot fault her diligence and comprehensiveness. With data gathered over some thirty years Marsh has a fine eye for the prank. She writes neither as a defender nor a detractor, but as an honest broker whose conclusion is that “practical jokes highlight social boundaries rather than bridging them” (172). This might lead one to conclude that the joke destroys community, but this conclusion, held by those who see in the practical joke only naked aggression, bullying, or soft sadism, misses the diverse meaning of this humorous genre. Simply highlighting divisions, for Marsh, does not necessarily undercut affiliation. Practical jokes arise from an energetic tradition of folk play, perhaps constituting a form of vernacular folk art. Drawing her examples from written accounts of jokers, from folklore archives, and from her own interviews in New Zealand and Indiana, Marsh asserts that, at times, these jokes can be sophisticated and clever.

Practically Joking, never dull, is larded with richly recounted examples of the craft. We read of lacing a soda with castor oil, placing a car on a college roof, tin-foiling a desk, sending novices on a fool’s errand, and short-sheeting bedding. Some are amusing, others are tiresome. Some provide for social control, others simply relieve boredom. Some generate laughter, still others generate a moral sanction that Marsh cleverly describes as “unlaughter.” By the end this serves to convince the reader that practical joking is a capacious category; perhaps one that does not deserve a single label.
By the time one finishes *Practically Joking* one has a sense of the domain—the morphological structure of the prank, the rhetoric of joshing, the politics of humor, institutional joking, jests in families, and public amusements. Marsh has a deep knowledge and appreciation of the form. Still, I wished that Marsh had a stronger argument to make about how practical jokes fit into social life. Consider three possible research directions. One might develop a theory of group culture by means of the practical joke. She might tell us more about the communal creation of “local joking aesthetics.” One aspect of these pranks is that they are designed to be notable within a community. They call for repeated references, a form of discourse that Marsh properly describes as “post-play.” Practical jokes are unlike most verbal jokes in this regard, which pass from the scene with a laugh or a groan, but typically without collective memory. However, in many cases, as Marsh recognizes, the practical joke aims to be recalled by the group. It is a discursive act; embarrassment solidified into memory. This is what establishes boundaries or social control. The practical joke is a performance that is destined to be translated into narration. This explains why Marsh can gather anecdotes from informants, who recount pranks decades later.

Second, practical jokes are mediated, as humiliation is a topic of dramatic comedy, both fictional (*Mean Girls, American Pie*) and in the earliest version of “reality television” (the in/famous *Candid Camera*). Political theorists might worry whether the hidden camera undercuts the secure sense of trust that democracy depends upon. Are people more guarded and suspicious because of such shows? Did Allen Funt destroy the American polity? Perhaps not, but he bears some blame. One wonders whether hidden camera shows like *Candid Camera* set the precedent for more politically motivated secret recordings, such as those that have targeted ACORN and Planned Parenthood, not to mention law enforcement entrapment schemes. Must we be on our guard against those cons who create and record deceptive frames?

Third, practical jokes are integrated into society not only through group memory, but also, on occasion, as part of the jocular economy. Companies sell tricks (joy buzzers, whoopee cushions, itching powder, pepper gum) that purchasers “play” on their acquaintances. None of these products are particularly humorous outside of a mild social sadism in which publicly embarrassing another is a form of amusement. This is a neo-liberal April Fools—a market for humiliation. What are the business models of these corporations? When and where are such devices peddled? Are they sold in times of economic distress as a form of distraction, more in sharp-elbowed cities, or to certain demographic groups? Although Marsh is not explicit, her examples strongly suggest that practical jokes are gendered repasts, served with a side of testosterone. Do women play pranks or is this simply too transgressive?

Much can be said about how practical jokes unspool society, forcing us to question the phenomenology of unlaughter and of jokes as praxis. Marsh provides a valuable platform to spark these discussions in a well-played volume. Finally, kudos to the book designer for an unusually effective cover—an iconic banana peel ready to trip the unwary—and for numbering pages from back to front.