“vulgar art.” All readers will benefit from the author’s insight into stand-up as a performance of vernacular culture.

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This first professional folklore monograph on practical jokes takes into account cases ranging from the times of Christian IV to the iFart iPhone app, from New Zealand to Cambridge, but mostly relies on archive materials, public sources (memoirs, the press, etc.), and 42 interviews (1988-2005), all from English-speaking countries. The first three chapters of the book catalogue the variety of practical jokes, presenting many examples and setting a theoretical framework. Marsh convincingly classifies practical jokes into five types depending on the role of the target and on whether a joke’s effectiveness requires revelation and/or deception. For instance, while the jokes classified as “put-ons” require belief from their targets (e.g., that the jackalope exists), in the “fool’s errands,” the belief becomes active, luring the target into a misguided course of action.

Marsh defines a practical joke as a scripted unilateral play, involving a trickster and a target, with the goal of incorporating the target without his/her knowledge and/or permission. This definition, however, may be subject to several questions. First, the unilaterality or one-sidedness of the practical joke play regarded by Marsh as a key concept for defining the genre is undermined by the author herself. Throughout the book she proves that practical jokes become a matter of reciprocity, showing how essential the participation of both parties is. Second, the definition is not sufficient to distinguish a practical joke from other genres,
e.g., humorous protests, flash mobs, conversational jokes, etc. As a result, the criteria used to choose material for this book remain obscure.

At the same time, Marsh is successful in showing how difficult finding these criteria may be, as the borders between practical jokes and other genres often leak. Chapter 4, in particular, concentrates on the relationship between practical jokes and (enacted) legends, beliefs, and tall tales. In this chapter the author also makes an important observation: practical jokes often require absurdity to ensure that fabrication stays within the realm of play. Marsh’s further explorations of play in practical jokes in chapters 5 and 6 show that fun is essential in power relations whether for protests against the powerful or for establishing hierarchies. Practical jokes are often the result of the targets’ own misbehavior, a way to teach the subtle lesson of social sanction. Chapter 7 provides the typology of support strategies for practical jokes—from aesthesizing ones (reported as, e.g., “rolling on the floor laughing”) to playful ritualized anger.

In the Introduction Marsh claims that chapters 8 to 10 explore the effects of practical jokes on their social settings. Their scope is, however, much wider. Chapter 8 goes back to analyzing power relations, concentrating on reciprocity and anomaly (with the latter calling for jokes), showing that in building solidarity or exclusion, practical jokes may produce connection and/or conflict. Here particularly and throughout the book, I was struck by the lack of reference to Elliott Oring’s idea of dyadic traditions (Oring 1984) as a model reflecting the majority of cases Marsh reports. Moreover, the author contradicts her previous arguments: in Chapter 9 she claims that initiation pranks are about establishing hierarchy, not reciprocity. The case studies presented in the last (eleventh) chapter, again prove that practical jokes are deeply embedded in relationships. This and other chapters concentrating on the fieldwork-transcribed materials are among my favorites. It is of high value that the author bases a significant part of her analysis on fieldwork and archives rather than, e.g., easily accessible YouTube videos of practical jokes (the latter, however, is also present in the book, although the amount of it is reasonable).
Due to the lack of a practical joke definition, the material in the book, to my mind, is not structured. Some types of jokes, such as initiation or April Fool jokes, receive a thorough description in separate chapters, reappearing for analysis in other parts as well. Similarly, many important arguments are scattered throughout the book, remaining underdeveloped due to the lack of systematization. Another problem is the usage of empirical materials: while some chapters heavily rely on fieldwork and archives, others remain quite theoretical, relying on what was written by previous researchers and not supported by much data.

On the other hand, the material of the book is so abundant and there are so many theories Marsh applies to it that orderliness would be hard to achieve. Not only is the data geographically and temporally diverse, but the research that informs Marsh’s approach to the data is also wide-ranging: folklore, psychology, humor theory, sociology, anthropology, etc. Grounded in accounts of practical jokes, the book shows that the genre and its peculiarities originate within relationships, reflecting the positions of jokers, butts, and audiences. From the Introduction to the conclusion, the author tries to save the poor reputation of practical jokes, whether stemming from scholarly or vernacular biases against them. Recognizing the universality of the phenomenon, Marsh insists on looking at the particulars, and accomplishes this throughout the book. Despite certain drawbacks I outlined above, the book is of undoubted value, not only due to being the only monograph on the topic. The major merit of Practically Joking is its rich material recorded from different parties and subjected to detailed analysis.

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