

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Shawn Chandler Bingham, Sara E. Green. *Seriously Funny: Disability and the Paradoxical Power of Humor*. Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2017. 200 pp., \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-62637-520-8; \$65.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-62637-565-9.

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In *Seriously Funny: Disability and the Paradoxical Power of Humor*, Shawn Chandler Bingham and Sara E. Green explore the power and influence of disability humor as embodied in the work of ten contemporary comedians with disabilities. They set disability humor in a historical and theoretical context and examine the ways in which these disabled comedians use humor to reshape and reconfigure cultural assumptions about disability. Their book is based on extensive research in the literature on disability and humor and on interviews with ten working disabled comedians, the best known of whom is Josh Blue, who was the 2006 winner of the television show *Last Comic Standing*.

The authors view the humor employed by these entertainers as providing “an empowering and accessible opportunity for comedians with disabilities to help create new narratives about the disability experience” (p. 3). They adopt a distinction common in disability studies between “*disabling humor* that ... denigrates people with disabilities by making them targets of derisive jokes, and *disability humor* that ... enlightens others about the disability experience, affirms the humanity of individuals with impairments, counters the widespread view that disability is a tragedy, and challenges stereotypes” (p. 4). The major theme of the book is “the role of humor in reinforcing and resisting existing narratives of disability, mediating the disability experience for others, and creating new narratives of disability.” The authors explore the manifestations of this theme by asking two questions: “First, how does humor function as a tool to investigate and analyze the disability experience, and what can be learned from this? Second, how is disability humor used

to mediate the disability experience to an audience” (p. 6)? By looking closely at the performances of the ten comedians and by drawing out the attitudes of these men and women concerning their use of humor to negotiate disability on stage and off, they seek to explain the role of these entertainers in collaboration with disability activists and scholars in reshaping the experience of having a disability.

Before examining the present state of disability humor, Bingham and Green dip into the extensive literature on humor in a wide variety of fields from history to philosophy, psychology, and sociology. They want the reader to appreciate how humor in general functions as a transformative agent before looking specifically at disability humor. The authors emphasize in particular Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of the carnival and the ways in which “carnival humor celebrates difference, pluralism, and the Other” (p. 22). Carnival humor, they maintain, with its emphasis on “subversion, openness to diversity, agency, and creativity,” fosters and encourages disability humor as “a form of activism” (p. 24). They argue that the comedians’ use of humor is a tool to “empower, raise consciousness, and in the carnival sense, foster a new open-mindedness” that carries beyond the walls of the performance space (p. 25).

The authors also provide a quick tour of the ways in which disability humor has been used throughout history to negotiate and renegotiate an understanding of disability. As societies’ understanding of disability changed so did disability humor and its uses. It also mattered what lens society used to view disability. Disability was re-

garded differently when viewed through a “*moral or religious lens*” than when seen through a “*medical or tragedy lens*” or a “*social oppression or discrimination lens*” (pp. 30–31). It follows that “the lens through which disability is viewed by the general public (or a particular audience) affects the kind of humor deemed acceptable and funny” (p. 31). The authors’ review of the history of humor and disability is relatively short, but it does “provide some historical background” for the discussion of contemporary comedians (p. 32). The chapter looks briefly at ancient Greece and Rome and at the role of the jester and fool in the Renaissance but treats more extensively modern history, beginning with the vaudeville era.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 draw extensively on the interviews with the ten comedians. Chapter 4 focuses on the public performance of these entertainers. In part, the authors consider the ways in which “public performance of humor also serves as a tool for the management of personal emotions in a disempowering and disabling world” (p. 78). The comedians also “deploy humor as a tool to create ambivalence and new perspectives on disability for audiences—often by disarming, discomfiting, and shocking people into a recognition that disability is not always and only a medical tragedy” (p. 80). And uniformly, these comedians “view their work as a way to advance the goals of the disability movement” (p. 85).

In chapter 5, “Creating New Narratives,” Bingham and Green continue their interdisciplinary approach by “drawing on theoretical perspectives from humor and disability studies, and our interviews, to analyze humor and comedy as sociocritical tools that can be used to reorder, disorder, question, and reconstruct traditional narratives of disability.” Their goal in the chapter is to “make a case for the theoretical complexity of humor by demonstrating how various theories and types of humor can function as *analytical tools of social life*.” They contend that these comedians advance discussions about disability because “(1) their humor shifts the framing of disability issues from the moral and medical to the social; and (2) they do this in a way that keeps the embodiment of disability front and center, literally” (p. 94). In addition to helping reframe the conversation about disability, the authors also argue that disability humor serves as a “coping mechanism” and as an “outlet for pent-up frustrations associated with living in an abelist world” (p. 101). Humor provides relief in part by exposing “constraints that are structural and cultural in origin—institutions, norms, rules, built environment, and so forth” (p. 102). The authors identify several types of disability humor that can function in these ways, including “superiority humor,”

“relief humor,” “inferiority humor,” and “incongruous humor.” Disability comedians use these four types of humor, and their own embodiment as a person with a disability, “to push back against disabling assumptions, beliefs, and actions of people living in an abelist world” (p. 116).

Chapter 6 explores how disability humor and disability comedians function in a world in which notions of political correctness seem to set limits on what can or cannot be said. After examining how transgressive comedians such as Lenny Bruce and George Carlin negotiated the linguistic minefields of political correctness, the authors discuss the ways in which disability comedians engage with and challenge notions of politically correct language regarding disability. They conclude that the men and women they interviewed “take enormous risks in bringing this kind of transgressive humor to mainstream audiences. Their work problematizes both strict rules of political correctness and traditional notions of disability as tragedy” (p. 141). By embodying this transgressive act on stage, these comedians help to open a public discussion of the place of disability and the disabled in society.

The last chapter, “Using Disability Humor to Reimagine Society,” addresses the role that disability humor and disabled comedians have to play in the larger disability movement which seeks to incorporate individuals with disabilities as full players in society. By helping to shift the debate from an impaired individual to a social problem, these comedians provide audiences “with a way to engage a critical perspective on the disability experience writ large—a way to analyze and understand the broader disability experience in its social context” (p. 152). By giving audiences a different perspective on disability, one rooted in their own embodied disability and their experience of living with a disability in an able-bodied world, these authors contend that the comedians in their own way are advancing the cause of disability activists. Following the concluding chapter, the authors provide brief biographical sketches of the ten comedians that they interviewed.

Although Bingham and Green provide a brief history of disability humor going back to ancient Greece and Rome, their focus is on the work of contemporary disability comedians who are challenging abelist assumptions and the social and cultural barriers encountered by individuals with disabilities. Readers will come away from the book with a good sense of how disability humor works in today’s world, as well as greater understanding of the achievements of disability comedians and the costs

of embodying disability on stage while simultaneously challenging social and cultural norms. By examining the careers of these ten comedians, the authors demonstrate that humor, and those who use it wisely and intentionally, have an important role to play in society's evolving understanding of disability.

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