



PROJECT MUSE®

The Joker: A Memoir by Andrew Hudgins (review)

Peter F. Murphy

Studies in American Humor, Series 4, Volume 1, Number 1, 2015, pp.
129-131 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press

STUDIES
IN
AMERICAN
HUMOR



EDITED BY
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

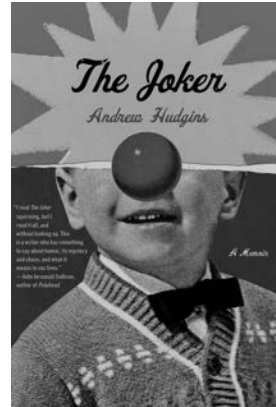
➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/579172>

The Joker: A Memoir.

By Andrew Hudgins. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. 352 pp.

REVIEWED BY PETER F. MURPHY



First and foremost, Andrew Hudgins is a poet. His long poem, “After the Lost War” (1989), was instrumental in re-establishing the narrative form in postmodern American poetry, and several of his collections have won prestigious awards. Hudgins is a funny poet, though in his poetic humor, as in his memoir, the humor is dark, wry, and scathing. His collection *Shut Up, You’re Fine: Instructive Poetry for Very, Very Bad Children* (2009) exemplifies this approach, and *A Clown at Midnight* (2013), published simultaneously with *The Joker*, shows Hudgins at some of his darkest, though funniest moments.

Even if you didn’t know that Hudgins is a poet, you would realize quickly that the book you are reading—this story of a life telling jokes to anyone who would listen—is not an academic study of humor. The prose is poetic and deeply aware of the close connection between the language of the joke and the language of the poem. For Hudgins, “the tension in jokes [provides] the friction to wordplay’s lubrication.” Jokes, like poems, “illuminate how we think” and underscore “the often irresolvable contradictions our lives are built on” (xxi).

He examines the contradictions at the heart of his complex identity as an entertainer, a joker, a performance artist in a book that is honest, brave, funny, and at times, very sad. Humor often victimizes someone, and frequently it is the comedian, the jokester, the fool, who is the brunt of the joke. From the time he told his first joke at the age of 12 or 13, he was unable to stop telling jokes. He couldn’t control himself. His book tries to understand why (and how).

At the same time, Hudgins’s memoir is a learned study of comedy and humor. He locates his analysis in a rich tradition of scholarship from Aristotle to Koestler, including St. Augustine, Bacon, Hobbes, Lamb, Twain, Nietzsche, Freud, Bergson, and Chesterton. Hudgins enjoys, particularly, “Goethe’s chilling judgment that ‘nothing shows a man’s character more than

what he laughs at" (57), and Baudelaire's declaration, "that because there was no sadness in Eden, there was no laughter" (102).

For Hudgins, the challenge is more than just understanding how that funny guy over there makes people laugh. The question driving his work is the importance to him, to Andrew Hudgins, of making people laugh. He ponders why he takes the risks he does to hear that chuckle, that guffaw, even that gasp of dismay when he has clearly stepped over the line. It is the stepping-over-the-line that intrigues him most as "one of those compulsive jokers whose need to laugh can seem peculiar, immature, and even socially corrosive to those who do not share it" (xii). Understanding how his insecurities and obsessions turned him into a clown structures the story.

In a book with hundreds of jokes, Hudgins relies on roughly eleven sub-genres: elephant jokes and Polack jokes are early favorites, to be followed quickly by dead baby jokes and jokes about quadriplegics, Helen Keller, religious hypocrisy, homosexuals, bestiality, taboos, incest, and the ubiquitous racist joke. Taboo is central to all these jokes, as Hudgins makes clear: "the curse of taboos is that pointless vulgarity and perversion are hard to distinguish from suppressed truths. Vulgarity has the thrill of uncovering truth, because in the beginning, tabooed truth was vulgarity, and the more outré something is, the more sophisticated it seems because few others know it" (204).

In his characteristic fashion of being both serious and funny, Hudgins notes that dead baby jokes work because he, like his audience, "could be the dead baby." He could also be "the armless and legless boy whose parents tossed him on the porch and called him Matt, hung him on the wall and called him Art, threw him in the pool and called him Bob. Anything that happened to them could happen to me."

This level of candor pervades the memoir, the story of a man who, to this day, cannot resist telling a joke no matter what the subject or who the audience. Hudgins knows this about himself and never lets us forget it. He loves how jokes either work or don't, and how, in the moment of indecision, the audience determines that the joker is "either a funny man or a fool." To his anguish, Hudgins admits, he is often a fool. His joking makes others uneasy, but for Hudgins, "uneasiness is the spring in the jack-in-the-box," it's what made him hate "the dead moments after the laughter was over [when] he felt stupid, exposed, unfinished, and lonelier than [he] had been before" (28).

This is the pathos that informs the memoir, the story of growing up white, Protestant, and male in the 1950s and 1960s American South. While the racist South informs much of the book, men and masculinity inform the engagement with humor. For a boy disinclined to embrace the dominant male roles of athlete and warrior, the ability to use language as a weapon worked to make people laugh, to be the center of attention in spite of not being either the high school quarterback or the war hero, and sexist jokes worked best: jokes that “foster a deeply unhealthy suspicion and distrust of women, but in mocking the pain, laughing at it, they also suggest a philosophical and emotional distancing that may, in time, be psychologically useful. To laugh at the betrayed man is to rehearse for the moment you become him” (196–97).

Gay jokes reinforce the sanctity of male heterosexuality. As Hudgins confesses, “we were bullies without knowing it, our jokes reaffirming what we already believed—that it was morally wrong, personally sick, and socially unthinkable for a man to have sex with another man” (219). Humor allows us to assuage our guilt, both for our own confused feelings of love for another man, and our oppressive behavior toward men who love other men.

This is a book about humor, yes, but central to the story is how one young boy used language in general and jokes in particular to survive in a world, the South in the 1950s and ‘60s, in which men took on very prescribed roles. This is a book about gender and about masculinity.

This would be an excellent book for a course on the memoir or comedy. The writing is superb and the story is compelling. From the first elephant joke he told in junior high, Hudgins has never stopped telling jokes. What he loves, he confesses, is “raucous laughter—the kind that earns angry stares from the tables near you in a restaurant. . . . Laughing until you are weak, gasping, holding your sides, barely able to stand is a drug. I have laughed until I have fallen on the floor in public places. I couldn’t have stopped myself if I wanted to, and I didn’t want to” (xii).

This is a funny, but ultimately serious, book about a funny man.

Murray State University