

JOKE BOOK

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By

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ABSTRACT

Joke Book is a creative thesis, a collection of comic personal essays, somewhat in the spirit of Montaigne, in which I trace the impact of several pivotal jokes on my life. Among other digressions, I give a mathematical theory of comedy using the Fibonacci sequence, mostly fail to read Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, try to blame lutefisk for the bitter character of Saskatchewan humour, reflect on my experiences in Skit Skit (a mildly successful local sketch comedy troupe in my city of 250,000), and tell of the time my father brought home his malfunctioning Wang (Laboratories Computer). In the process, I give an incomplete though still exhaustive account of my life and my surroundings (namely, rural Saskatchewan since 1985), and reflect on racism, class, sexism, television, memes, hip-hop, and, again, lutefisk. Sometimes bordering on the absurd, the work is more footnotes than actual prose, and more sizzle than steak. It also details the author's complicity in the wrongful accusation and subsequent murder of a chicken in 1993, when the author was eight years old.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Joke Book is a collection of comic personal essays, initially inspired by the work of Michel de Montaigne; in playing with imitating his distinctive prose voice, I found a catalyst for my own experiments in creating a humorous, maximalist, self-reflective work which aims to capture some of my own personality. While the “Note on the Genre of This Piece” seems to acknowledge a certain slipperiness to the conventions to which the book adheres, it remains, still, with all its silliness, fairly solidly in its genre. Since the focus of these essays is largely autobiographical, it can be said to do some of the work of a memoir, but that does not make it one. Even the bizarre joke chapters (“What Are Jokes?” or “The Book of Big Acts”) are just that—jokes which serve as ornaments on a deceptively coherent (I hope) group of essays.

The title *Joke Book* provides multiple interpretations, all of which are valid ways into this work: first, it is ultimately a collection of (or rather, a series of excuses for) jokes, as found continually adorning the personal essays; second, it is a book *about* jokes—what they are, what they mean, how they work; third, it is somewhat of a joke or burlesque of what a book ought to be, and thus is a *joke of a book*; fourth, as a collection of, as mentioned, personal essays which do some of the work of a memoir, it is therefore about my life, and the title serves to label *my life* (such as it is, therefore the upcoming, well, joke) a joke.

I had for some time wanted to write a memoir of sorts, using jokes that I had heard or told or otherwise interacted with at various times throughout my life; as I mention in “Genesis,” I am quite sure my first ever memory was of my grandmother telling an (ultimately painful) joke. I’ve voraciously consumed and wanted to create funny media of all types since I was quite young. My undergrad transcripts show classes in comedy and satire; I chose my first degree, a BFA in Drama (Acting), in large part because it required me to take classes in Commedia dell’Arte and Clown, which were cancelled during the summer I declared—another of life’s little jokes. I am, at times, as disclosed here, nearly physically incapable of not joking.

I had also wanted to write about comedy, about my experiences therein and various theories I had concocted, most notably my theory on comedy and the Fibonacci sequence, as outlined in “Numbers.” I knew I had these two subjects in mind: comedy, and myself. It wasn’t until I had encountered (or re-encountered) Montaigne in our non-fiction class that I had the model I needed to proceed.

As part of my parody of Montaigne, I felt that I should take some of the idiosyncrasies of his style (in particular, his lengthy, digressive, discursive sentences) and exaggerate them as much as I could—which would also put me in the happy company of authors like Laurence (“Digressions are the sunshine of reading”) Sterne, and other latter-day maximalists such as Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace, as a forceful reaction to post-Hemingway English writing style. While it was suggested to me that perhaps I ought to hew closer to Montaigne, if I were to truly and effectively parody him throughout this book, this would have required an attention to detail I had very little interest in, since my ultimate goal was to capture myself, my experiences and my thought and not merely to simply offer a book of direct Montaigne parodies (else I might have come up with, “Of My Navel,” “Of This Tower I Never Seem to Leave,” and so forth). Instead, what is here instead is one of the many “extremely diverse” forms of parody Bakhtin describes, one which is, as I have said, one part style, and perhaps more his “individually characterological way of seeing, thinking, and speaking” (106). This work aims to be in the *spirit* of Montaigne, if nothing else.

It is no accident, then, that I quote from Montaigne's introduction to his first volume of his *Essays* in my own Foreword. Montaigne's goal, that of preserving some elements of his personality for the private enjoyment (Montaigne, self-effacingly, says "convenience") of his friends and family, resonated with me, and was something I returned to again and again as I wrote, and will do here as well, as I attempt to justify myself and this work (2).

I myself am a somewhat chatty person, when inclined; my conversation is marked by constant joking or the attempt to make jokes of things, my distractibility, and, accordingly, my tendency towards (sometimes contradictory) tangents, particularly ones I think others might find humorous. It is not hard to see what I may have found in Montaigne. As well, while I am—or strive to be—conscious of my position as a white man in that confluence of history now called the 21st century, and while basing my work on Montaigne's canonical-literary-white-maleness would seem at odds with that, I actually find the opposite to be true. His very embrace of subjectivity, of his own self as subject, not only serves as a great equalizer between himself and the reader, but also echoes the aim of the many anti-oppressive artists, thinkers, and disciplines—the act of telling one's own truth. In this way, I hope I am able to de-generalize myself and my hegemonic position in telling the very specific stories and truths about the things I know, to neutralize my thoughts as subjective, as "just what this asshole thinks," as I say in the foreword.

Thus, I had largely three goals in writing—to examine and capture what I could of myself in the manner of Montaigne; to do so with a sort of specificity about myself and my world so as to attempt, at least, to overcome any pretension of objectivity which may have been put in place by myself or the reader, consciously or unconsciously, owing to my education, background, and/or general social positionality; and third, to make people, and I hope not only myself, laugh.

In talking about a work which relies so heavily upon jokes and the concept of jokes, it is perhaps necessary to first go about defining some terms. First, I find it necessary to identify the persona of the "author"; from here on in, when I speak about the author of *Joke Book*, without quotes, I refer to this persona and not myself, Brent McFarlane, student, master's degree-hopeful, writer, human. As Phyllis Barber relates, the "I" in non-fiction, for the writer, is necessarily evasive, a construct, and essentially fictional (180-1); Phillip Lopate likewise talks about the fundamental inability to remove all the masks of persona from one's writing (xxviii-xxix). This is so much truer in writing humorous personal essays, in that, as I will demonstrate, I am taking on an exaggerated, comical version of myself—a sort of jester or clown.

Next, without dipping too deeply into the many conflicting theories of humour, let me supply you with a simple definition of a "joke." Drawing on what he (and others) term the "incongruity" theories of comedy, John Morreall quotes Cicero: "The most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh" (11). Simon Critchley gives us the same basic concept, only somewhat more fleshed out:

Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves. (1).

Bakhtin's writings can be used to expand this notion of "novel actuality," to define what this change can be and why, in one particular sort of joking, or comic writing, at least. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the humour of the carnival, of that of the Roman Saturnalia, in which the conventions of daily, or what Bakhtin terms the "extra-carnival" life, are inverted, giving people freedom from the restrictions of their society and the roles imposed upon them in it. In these rituals, masters would serve servants, and regular rules of propriety would not apply. The carnival atmosphere temporarily inverts the social order, functioning as a sort of release valve for pressures people might otherwise find overwhelming if they were unceasing. Bakhtin finds this attitude the driving force behind many rituals and practices, including parodies devised by medieval monks, parallel cults in earlier human societies which mocked deities who were simultaneously revered, and the larger-scale medieval and Roman feasts and festivals from which his theory derives its primary inspiration (197-201). Lopate, too, references this dynamic between the writer and reader in the personal essay: "The conversational address to the reader is frequently the signal for [. . .] cheeky liberties, as though the rebellious, clever servant-author were tweaking the nose of the dull-witted master-reader" (xxxii).

Furthermore, in the essays I, time and again, describe my inability to interpret a situation or to respond to it without joking. In this, I (and yes, "the author," though I am being entirely serious and this does, to an extent, accurately represent me, Brent McFarlane, human) position myself as like one of the court clowns or fools Bakhtin describes and makes note of in *Rabelais's* work:

They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season . . . they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period . . . but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time (198).

It is in this Saturnalian mode or spirit that *Joke Book* operates (and in which it purports its author lives), though not within the context of a rigidly hierarchical society, but between the more conversational (as per Montaigne) relationship between writer and reader. As Morreall, in his *Comic Relief*, points out:

In everyday humour between friends, too, there is considerable breaking of social conventions. Consider five of the conversational rules formulated by Paul Grice:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Avoid obscurity of expression.
4. Avoid ambiguity.
5. Be brief (2).

Morreall then goes on to show how each of these rules are violated in different comic situations, to humorous effect (2-3). *Joke Book*, in its own fashion, violates these rules and more; as a piece of mock-academic work, it also violates unspoken rules, such as "do not antagonize or cajole your thesis committee," "do not engage in the (perhaps petty?) political in-fighting within your university/institution," "do not denigrate your university," and runs roughshod over acceptable practice regarding, say, the proper treatment of academic authority (for example, mocking

Kierkegaard as boring when it is the authorial voice, the book's central persona, which lacks the discipline to read and parse it).

What is more, the author is absolutely blatant about these lapses; in the early part of "The Book of Joel" from *Joke Book*, for instance, the author cops to absolutely making up a theory about Saskatchewan humour discussed (or from an "interview") with a friend, flying blindly without notes or quotations—absolutely unacceptable, were this a work of academic writing. In many other places, the author admits to not having read sources he cites, or of not having the inclination to go and double-check this fact or figure. Thus, while we are in the learned mode of Montaigne, and ostensibly, since this is a master's thesis, the academic mode, we are in a kind of inverted, Saturnalian version of it, where the author does not know a great many things and emphatically does not care to. This sort of author-as-mock-authority technique bears some resemblance to (and inspiration from) other comic "non-fiction" pieces such as *More Information Than You Require* or *The Areas of My Expertise* by John Hodgman (in which Hodgman at one point gives a list of over 700 [fictional] hobo names, supposedly from the historic record), or *America: The Book*, by the writers of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. This comic type can be traced back to the "learned fool" or "Il Dottore (The Doctor)" stock character of Commedia dell'Arte, "an eternal gas-bag who cannot open his mouth without spitting out a Latin phrase or quotation," much like Montaigne, "[who] has spent his whole life learning everything without understanding anything" (Ducharte 196). To bring the whole matter back in view of Cicero's pronouncement: we expect authority, and are given silliness instead, and this incongruence (ideally) makes us laugh. It relieves our expectations that we must be serious and learn something, and inverts the expected relationship between learned author and reader. It is that great levelling which occurs in the personal essay, which Lopate calls democratizing, quoting Montaigne: "And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own rump" (xxiii). Every brilliant or stupid thing the author does, up to and including the "joke chapters" I alluded to above, serves this purpose.

This silliness continues right until the end, when the author refuses to end the piece in a rational way. However, as Bakhtin points out, this inversion is meant only as a relief valve on seriousness, and thus the reader can assume, correctly (and this thesis committee can personally attest to the fact), that this work was still submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Fine Arts degree.

Along the way, emphasizing particularly Grice's Rule #5 as quoted by Morrell, and taking my cue from Montaigne, the work got very tangled as the tangents continually branched and returned to themselves. As a result of these many digressions, I found my pages-long sentences began to lose their sense, and my system of many nested parentheses was confusing to my workshop readers. Thus, instead, I found footnotes (as some might find religion, I suppose). As Dave Eggers, in his *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and Junot Diaz, particularly in the first section of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (both rather voice-driven pieces), have both done, I use the footnotes to give the reader important background information that might otherwise interrupt the voice- or style-driven flow of the main text of the essay. However, the footnotes in my work also undercut and compete with this text.

Footnotes, as historian Anthony Grafton notes in his *The Footnote: A Curious History*, have long had a satirical and ironic purpose, stretching back to Gibbon and Swift; in fact, in a footnote, he mentions Frank Palmeri's article "The Satiric Footnotes of Swift and Gibbon," which further expands: "[Swift and Gibbon's] satiric footnotes make use of what Mikhail Bakhtin has characterized as dialogical parody" (245). Palmeri more broadly argues that "the

transition from the use of marginal glosses or citations to the use of footnotes or endnotes signals a shift from a paradigm organized around relations of resemblance and acts of commentary to one that produces representations and acts of criticism.” Thus the footnote, in already suggesting a counter-narrative to or a criticism of the main text, even without my extreme uses of it, has an inherently subversive design.

As Bakhtin says, “parody introduces into [...] discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the initial one” (106). We think we are in a learned discourse, in the style of Montaigne, and yet there is a novel actuality produced, one different than our expectations. (One, or rather I, hope this means laughs—or at least mild amusement.) Specific to the footnotes, we are also at times given an entirely different story than the one we thought we were reading—and rather than serving as a minor narrative, the footnotes completely take over, sometimes for nearly a dozen or so pages—a somewhat literal Saturnalian inversion, where the words at the bottom overtake the words at the top. Again, this destabilizing effect is meant first to create laughter or amusement; second, to destroy any notion of authority in the work, so as to both assuage my guilty white liberal conscience and to bring the reader in more intimately, as Montaigne does; and third, to preserve something of my own conflicted, splintered consciousness.

As a “joke” upon the concept of “book,” then, the work has several avenues by which it burlesques the idea of what a book ought to be. First and most obviously, it mocks that ur-book (indeed, *The Book*) of the Western tradition, of Western literature—The Bible, in how it titles its chapters—alongside subtitles which parody Montaigne. This is again very much in line with the Saturnalian tradition—the mocking of the sacred via the profane. Rather than the rather sanctified books of the Bible, we have instead these generally profane works, including “The Book of Wang,” and “The Book of . . . Ejaculation.” We are back again in the world of Rabelais as described by Bakhtin. Indeed, throughout the footnotes (and occasionally in the main text), the author of this work alludes to starting a profane cult with bizarre rules. This, too, is a parodic device, meant to undercut the authority (perhaps derived from the Bible as model) with which writers in the Western tradition tend to be endowed and with which they occasionally endow themselves. This extra layer of parody works in harmony with the general form of the personal essay itself. Lopate quotes E.B. White:

The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen. [...] A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence (xxxiii).

Mordecai Richler, in his foreword to his anthology, *The Best of Modern Humour*, similarly quotes a number of old saws by writers about comic writing itself being “sometimes regarded as necessarily second-rate[, a]n occupation not quite respectable for the mature writer” (xiv). Thus do I write jokingly in a joke subgenre of a joke genre—a collection of such works would naturally be a joke of a book, hardly fit for serious consideration.

Finally, while the idea of my life as a joke is itself one of the jokes embedded in the title *Joke Book*, there is some seriousness there as well. As a person with a disability—trust me, the distractability and extreme variability of focus from one extreme to the other is not all affectation—my life, too, might be seen as a “joke,” as unserious or “necessarily second-rate,” as

compared to those persons without neurological disorders. As Nicole Markotic says in her conversation with Michael Davidson in “Talking Disability Poetics” in the collection *Towards. Some. Air.* (speaking, of course, of poetry), poetry can either act as being accessible, if it doesn’t change or challenge the norms of expression, or it can “disrupt production in fabulous ways,” in an anti-capitalist and therefore anti-normalizing way, since accessibility itself depends on notions of inclusion and exclusion. My text is deeply disruptive to the productive task of reading, and thus serves to both impart something of the quality my own experience of the world to the reader, and again to preserve my mind and its workings, as Montaigne described. Of course, a difficult text is not without precedent in literature, and thus the complexity of the work also parodies its own supposed ambition or pretences to greatness (I did not read any Proust in preparation for this statement, my defense, or the writing of the work itself, but I understand the cookie did it).

It is my hope, then, that in all the silliness, all of the endless digressions, this book of jokes shares its aims with those of the personal essay form, of comic writing, of the *Essays* of Montaigne and even simple jokes themselves, for their goals are all one; as Lopate says:

If tragedy is said to ennoble people and comedy to cut people down to size, then the personal essay, with its ironic deflations, its insistence on human frailty, tilts towards the comic. Montaigne [...] was at pains to show *Homo sapiens* as a fickle, conceited fool whose vanity needed pulling down. However, by drawing attention to so many strands of inconsistency in human behaviour, he could not help but create the opposite impression: a humanity enlarged by complexity. The fulsome confession of limit carries the secret promise of an almost infinite opening-out (xxvii).

It is my fervent wish that this work, like all its delightful inspirations, creates such a sense of infinite space: in me, in the reader, in the world—a sense of, again, novel actualities, through a somewhat accurate picture of my own limited human vision. Or, failing that, that a person, somewhere (not necessarily on this committee) is moved to laugh, perhaps once.

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