

Book review

Marsh, Moira (2015). *Practically Joking*. Logan: Utah State University Press. 195 pp.

Moira Marsh, a humour scholar, folklorist and librarian, gives a detailed and expert overview of practical joking. Her book is very valuable because this area of study is not very well researched. The author also admits that the subject has had “a poor reputation” and has been called “the lowest form of humour”, primitive, aggressive and cruel (p. 2). On the other hand, she proves that the best of practical jokes “demand significant skill and talent, not only to think up but also to execute” (p. 3).

In the eleven chapters of the book the author provides a very good account of what practical jokes are and how they function in different spheres of life. The first two chapters entitled “What’s practical about practical jokes?” and “The types of the practical jokes” give the theoretical background of the study. Practical jokes are broadly understood as “forms of unilateral play” (p. 6), and, more specifically, a practical joke is “a scripted, unilateral play performance involving two opposed parties—trickster and target—with the goal of incorporating the target into play without his or her knowledge, permission, or both” (p. 12). Thus, apart from the target, a script is the essential part of this type of jokes. Not only does it include the step-by-step instruction for the trickster, but it also contains the description of how the targets will or should behave. The differences between the practical jokes and the other kinds of jokes are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Moira Marsh proposes five types of practical jokes based on such criteria as targets’ various roles, revelation and deception. They are as follows: 1) *put-ones*—known as “leg-pulls” or “passive pranks” as they may be spontaneous and require from the targets a word or phrase showing that they believe the fiction; 2) *fool’s errands*—when targets act on a specific belief, so the aim is to make them behave in an extraordinary way. This type is often used in the rites of passage for new hires (e.g. fetching a non-existent tool may be one of the examples); 3) *kick me*—this type turns the target into an unconscious performer (p. 26); 4) *booby traps*—which aim to surprise with the intention of causing a loss of composure, so astonishment is essential to effectiveness here (e.g. loud unexpected noises or sudden jabs in the backside that cause a physical reaction); 5) *stunts*—they have their particular audiences, their targets are always collective and anonymous, they burst unexpectedly into everyday discourse or into public spaces—flash mobs are examples of stunts (p. 29).

One of the most common practical joking traditions still vivid in many countries is April Fools’ Day, whose celebrations date back to the ancient Roman times. In Italy (*pesce d’aprile*), in France (*poissons d’avril*), in Belgium, and in the French-speaking areas of Switzerland and Canada that tradition is often known as “April fish”. In Polish, it is still called with a Latin term—*Prima Aprilis* (meaning the “first of April”). Private and public pranks, especially media ones, are allowed and welcome on that day. No wonder that the first analytic chapter (chapter 3) entitled “The great drug bust: Morphology of an April Fools’ joke” begins with a detailed study of one of them.

Chapter 4, “Lies, damned lies, and legends”, deals with the question of truth in relation to practical jokes and some other folklore genres. Two next chapters explore morality issues. Chapter 5, titled “The (im)morality of the practical joke”, discusses the educative role of practical jokes and their moral evaluation, while chapter 6, entitled “All jokes are bad if they are any good: Humour support and unlaughter”, presents a reception theory of humour. Chapter 7, involving “The rhetoric of humour support”, explores the techniques used by joke targets to mark their attitudes towards their mistreatment. The following three chapters discuss practical jokes in their social settings, in particular, how jokes are used in public spaces (cf. Bala & Zangl 2015). Chapter 8, entitled “That was why we were such good mates”, points out the power of building or destroying solidarity in different relationships depending on how practical joking is received. Chapter 9, “Pranks, rituals, and hazing”—also commonplace for this kind of behaviour—presents practical jokes on weddings and initiations, including cases when such a joke is received with unlaughter and/or treated as a harassment. Chapter 10 on “Pranks in public: Spoofs, rags, and stunts” is devoted to public pranks. Apart from university students’ pranks, the media April Fools’ Day is discussed, which leads us back to the subject of chapter 3. The last part deals with a detailed analysis of “Some practical jokers”. The book is concluded with “Post-Play” and two indexes: one referring to terms and names and the other one is the “Index of practical jokes examples”.

The main basis of the research is forty-two interviews both with jokers and joke targets complemented with many other sources. The examples were collected in the years 1986-1988 and in 2005. The author’s 20-year-long intensive research on the subject of practical jokes (cf. Marsh 2014) was crowned with this book. Most of the described cases come from the United States or New Zealand, so the material makes us wonder on the existence and the role of practical jokes in other cultures.

The strong point of the first two chapters constituting the theoretical part is that they draw the map of the terms used to describe the practical jokes, build their definitions and show the relations between the researched issue and other forms of joking. The analytical part, on the other hand, gives readers the feeling of participation in the (sometimes very elaborate) procedure of constructing the trap and observing its consequences. The author allows us to see the particular stories from different points of view, i.e. from the point of view of the people responsible for inventing the jokes as well as from the targets’ and the audiences’ perspectives.

The discussions of the multiple functions of practical joking are particularly interesting. Such functions can be seen, inter alia, as a way of sending “a subtle message of social sanction” (p. 59), a trial of correcting the miscreant, “playing on weakness” (p. 62), drawing attention to political messages (p. 64), “subverting the symbolic environment” (p. 66), changing the routines and pointing out that life should be something more than “running through our programmes” (p. 71). While reading about the enforcing of small changes in everyday habits, I could not stop thinking about Amélie played by Audrey Tautou, the heroine of the French movie *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. She punished the bad neighbours by playing some practical jokes on them, introducing secretly tiny rearrangements that disturbed their daily routines. However, small surprises were supposed to bring a smile to those who deserved it.

Some people are known for being practical jokers. They can talk for hours about their failed or successful pranks and they can be remembered because of their jokes. In the story of the experimental physicist Robert Williams Wood, one of his colleagues writes:

In Paris he played a joke on his landlady who kept a pet tortoise. He bought several tortoises of different sizes and exchanged them every few days making it appear that the tortoise was growing at a tremendous rate. The landlady told Wood about this and he suggested she should tell the press. Later he shrank the tortoise by reversing the process.

(Palmer 2013: 4)

As we can see, Marsh's thesis is confirmed: practical jokes sometimes engage a significant amount of time and at times even money, and they are definitely signs of the joker's creativity.

The knowledge about the mechanisms of practical jokes is important, as they are being spread in different areas of life—not only in private spheres, but also in public ones. Recently they can also be found in digital marketing: “[t]here is an increasing number of companies which exploit pranks as a creative content solution for their on-line presence” (Karpńska-Krakowiak & Modliński 2014: 31). Pranks may be used as innovative forms of digital advertising and their potential can be observed in branding effectiveness (e.g. in maximising brand reach, exposure, brand visibility, drawing consumer attention, eliciting strong emotions, etc.; Karpńska-Krakowiak & Modliński 2014: 31).

In addition, academic life can be a good arena for practical joking. Successful pranks may stay alive for a long time. We could consider if this is good news, and how much truth there is in the following statement: “With all apologies to the hundreds of esteemed professors at the College, pranks are the real memories that students carry with them forever” (Busbee 2008: 48).

I have started reading the book with a kind of scepticism, thinking that practical jokes are very rare and culture specific phenomena, but then I was surprised to discover that the longer I read the book, the more examples kept occurring to me and the more jokes from completely different backgrounds were coming to my mind. Moira Mash proves that, apart from April Fools' jokes or some pupils' misbehaviours, there is a huge range of possibilities for practical joking. When looked for, especially when thinking about them, pranks start to appear unexpectedly often, and one may find them in different spheres of life. The conclusion after reading the book is the following: practical jokers can attack you in many places and in the most unexpected way—so beware!

Dorota Brzozowska
Opole University, Poland
dbrzozowska@uni.opole.pl

References

- Busbee, J. (2008). ‘The college's greatest pranks, goofs and practical jokes’. *William and Mary Alumni Magazine*, Winter. Retrieved February 2nd, 2016 from <http://alumni.wm.edu/magazine-archive/winter08/pdfs/pranks.pdf>, pp. 48-51.
- Bala, S. & Zangl V. (2015). ‘Editorial: Humour in art and activism’. *European Journal of Humour Research* 2 (3). Special issue on humour in art and activism, pp. 1-6.
- Karpńska-Krakowiak, M. & Modliński A. (2014). ‘Prankvertising – pranks as a new form of brand advertising’. *Modern Management Review* XIX (21) (3), pp. 31-44.
- Marsh, M. (2014). ‘On going too far’. *European Journal of Humour Research* 2 (4), pp. 126–139.
- Palmer, W. P. (2013) ‘The Wood's way: Brilliant experimental physics and practical jokes’, Curtin University of Technology, Australia. Retrieved February 2nd, 2016 from <http://ipsitransactions.org/journals/papers/tar/2013jan/p1.pdf>, pp.1-5.