

Book review

Sover, Arie (2021). *Jewish Humor. An Outcome of Historical Experience, Survival and Wisdom*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Jewish Humor is a treat for connoisseurs. I have not read a book that would bring in so much of novel information for a long time. It is not only erudite, as the author is obviously extremely well read, but it is also entertaining as becomes a book on humour – in spite of the fact it is one only in part. As the subtitle and the conclusion indicate, the book dwells on the context of Jewish history and “Jewish experience” as a way of explaining the nature of Jewish humour. This definitely makes sense to the uninitiated reader, although one has the impression that the focus on the specifics of the context and the encyclopaedic details throw the book out of balance. After all, this is to be the book on Jewish humour, which is “fundamentally different from the humour of other nations” (p. 275) – now, is it then? In what way? This is one of the sweeping statements in the book that the author wants the reader to take for granted – Jewish humour is definitely unique, but the fundamental difference from other kinds of humour is yet to be demonstrated. The author also claims that “for the Jews, jokes are not merely entertainment, they are part of their experience and culture” (p. 268), but then so they are for other nations, suffice it to mention jokes under communism told in Eastern Europe in the second half of the 20th century (cf. Davies 1998).

The study reads reasonably well, although it is uneven – there are parts that engage the reader due to the compelling story that they tell, while others are more patchy and bristle with unfamiliar names – those read like an encyclopaedia, especially when names and titles are not accompanied by humorous extracts. Also some parts of the book are more developed than others, which is probably inevitable since the book covers two thousand plus years of Jewish history.

The book provides ample background for non-Jewish readers, which will no doubt be appreciated by them. It starts from the sources of Jewish history, identity as well as humour, primarily the Bible, rabbinical literature and the Talmud, and points out some examples of what could be regarded as intellectual humour present there. The following part discusses the Middle Ages from the Jewish perspective of the life of persecution under Islam and Christianity, the story of expulsion and pogroms, which, however, also embraced the period of relative calm and creative expansion of Jewish humour in Muslim-ruled Spain. After a short discussion of the rise of popular Jewish humour practiced by the “badchen”, or early stand-up comedians, the author mentions a few other types of performers, such as the Broder Singers from Galicia, and follows with another 20 pages of history of different Jewish movements, such as the Hassidim and the Haskalah. These are central to the discussion of the nature of “intergroup” Jewish humour that followed in the 18th and 19th centuries – this part abounds in jokes and is eye-opening to those who perhaps even heard some of the jokes before but could not interpret them properly in the historical context.

The parts that follow (about 40 pages) concern Central and Eastern Europe and are both fascinating and disappointing. They are fascinating because they bring to the readers’ attention the range of both well-known and little-known writers who wrote humorous stories, novels or

poems, including Heinrich Heine and Franz Kafka, who are not exactly known for their humour. On the occasion of the discussion of Kafka's "absurd fantasy stories" which "create a sense of helplessness", the author offers the readers his belief that "without pleasure there is no humour" (is he then the supporter of positive psychology, one could ask?). In Kafka, the pleasure, in the author's view, is provided by wit, while the "sense of suffocation" contradicts pleasure (p. 124).

These parts are disappointing because, in the short section on the jokes featuring "the Wise Men of Chelm", he glosses over the curious fact that the town of Chelm, currently in eastern Poland, became the Jewish fooltown (p. 95). This fact baffled the late humour scholar Christie Davies, who recommended the search of archives of Eastern Europe in order to find an explanation of this phenomenon, seemingly contradicting his centre-and-periphery model of ethnic humour. It is a pity Sover did not follow this further, especially since he admitted that, in the 1920s and 1930s, "the Jews of Poland exhibited, paradoxically, an incredible outburst of unique cultural creativity" (p. 122). This is another source of disappointment as, apart from the short sections on four writers (including Soviet commissar Isaac Babel), the author reduced this part to the discussion of the comedians Shimon Dzigan and Israel Schumacher, while ignoring the richness of Jewish life in interwar Poland (cf. Brzozowska & Chlopicki 2012, which includes chapters on Jewish *szmonces* – a cabaret form often longer than a joke – and cabaret songs authored to be performed in Polish by people like Marian Hemar, born Marian Heschel).

What follows in the book are chapters on humour under Nazi and Soviet regimes and the Holocaust, on the extraordinary expansion of Jewish humour in the United States, both in the cinema, television, and comedy clubs,¹ and in mainstream literature, with the major figures such as Singer, Malamud, Bellow and Roth, who are not exactly associated with humour in the popular awareness, but Sover proves beyond doubt that they did write humorous prose.

The large part of the book (70 pages) that deals with Israeli humour was the most interesting for me, as this is the part where I learned most – not much has been written about this in English before, and thus the author could be credited with doing pioneering work here. He divides the story of humour in Israel into four periods (including that before the establishment of the State of Israel), followed by the separate discussion of humour in Israeli literature. What was the most fascinating tendency that the author demonstrated and illustrated was the gradual opening of Israeli society to challenging humour that concerned sensitive or even taboo subjects, such as the military, Zionism, the Holocaust, or the Orthodox way of life. He also shows how the prevalence of humour of Eastern European origin, with the typical characters of schlemiel or schlimazel, gave way to other humorous characters that were more in line with the life in contemporary independent Israel. The readers also discover how the dominating Ashkenazi (originally Eastern European) humour, considered sophisticated in the first decades of Israeli history, gradually has given way to Mizrahi humour (of Middle Eastern origin), considered to be largely light, unchallenging entertainment. This divide in Israeli society brings to mind the similar divide in Dutch society discussed by Kuipers in her now classical study (2011).

The book concludes with several short and general chapters on Israeli ethnic jokes (with great examples), on the nature of Jewish jokes (somewhat superficial), as well as on anti-Semitism and Jewish "self-humour" (what Sover probably means by this term is self-mocking, self-deprecating or self-denigrating humour, as the term *self-humour* seems vague and potentially confusing).

Due to its enviable breath-taking scope, the book suffers from minor inaccuracies or simply mistakes that could have been rectified had the book been carefully edited before publication. There are misnomer chapters, such as "Jewish emigration from Europe to the United States",

¹ Sover emphasizes the domination of Jewish comedians in American humour in the 1970s and 1980s, citing the extreme disproportion between Jews constituting 3% of American population and 75-95% of US comedians (pp. 148-149 and 273).

which is two page long and half of it is devoted to Jews in Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution, or “Jewish culture in Europe between the World Wars”, which focuses on Jewish humorous literature of the third generation and only mentions two stand-up comedians active in Poland, Dzigal and Schumacher, towards the end.

Given all the encyclopaedic abundance of details, names, dates and titles in the book, the author apparently wanted to make sure the reader stays alert while going through them as we can encounter the following puzzles:

Yakoov Stern, ...head of the Rabbinical Beit Midrash (religious academy) in Warsaw between 1826-1835... His father-in-law, Chaim Zelig Slonimski,...the founder and first editor of the *Hatzefira* (the Siren) newspaper (1862) (p. 70; “curvature of spacetime?”, a reader thinks).

Gary Shteyngart (1972)... His father was an engineer in a camera factory and his mother was a pianist. In 1979, they immigrated to the United States, when Shteyngart was only five years old (p. 170; Sover’s mathematics are not anybody else’s mathematics).

Lara Vapnyar (1975)... was born in Russia. She spent her first twenty-three years in Moscow. .. Her mother was a professor of mathematics... In 1994 she immigrated to the United States (p. 172; Sover is obviously not a professor of mathematics himself).

There are also a few inaccurate claims concerning Eastern Europe, such as that concerning borscht, as “a beet soup so typical of the Eastern European Jewish kitchen” (p. 147; borscht is typical of Ukrainian or Polish cuisine in general, and is associated with Jewish cooking only in the US). The city of Łódź was “in Western Poland” (p. 131) only in pre-war Poland, while at the time when the comedian Schumacher returned there in 1947, it was already in central Poland (following the post-war shift of Polish borders). The statement concerning the “deluge” “in which Poland was invaded first by Russia (1654-1667) and then by the Swedish Empire” (p. 61) is based on inaccurate Wikipedia information, since the term “the deluge” in Polish history is limited to the invasion of the Swedes in 1655-1660 (immortalised by the novel by the Nobel prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz under this very title: “The Deluge” (*Potop*) published in the original Polish in 1886, and first translated into English in 1898).

As far as the selection of information is concerned, some details could have been skipped, as, after all, the book is supposed to be about Jewish humour, not about the detailed history of the pogroms or persecutions; such information is important, of course, but it is just the question of the right balance of the book. The author sometimes insists on providing information the reader could consider superfluous and perhaps morbid; just to take one set of examples, three consecutive sections on Jewish writers end as follows, forming a strange three-part accelerating sequence:

over 75,000 people attended his [i.e. Abraham Goldfaden] funeral procession (p. 109).

a mass funeral was held [for Isaac Leib Peretz], which nearly one hundred thousand people attended (p. 110).

nearly two hundred thousand Jews accompanied him [i.e. Sholem Aleichem] to his final resting place. This was the largest funeral processing the City of New York had ever witnessed (p. 113-114).

As indicated before, the book would have benefited from thorough editing as it is not devoid of misprints, word omissions in citations, and some awkward translations as well, which lose the original humour (perhaps inevitably). Overall, in spite of some persistent inaccuracies (including some imprecise references to sources, and some wrong page numbering in the index), the book is a mine of information, which the interested reader could explore further, as the text of the book is followed by a comprehensive 34-page-long list of references and a 13-page long index. There is no comparable book on the scholarly market and I would strongly recommend it to any reader interested in history of the Jews as well as Jewish humour (in this order). Having read this, making ignorant anti-Semitic statements would just be a total shame.

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