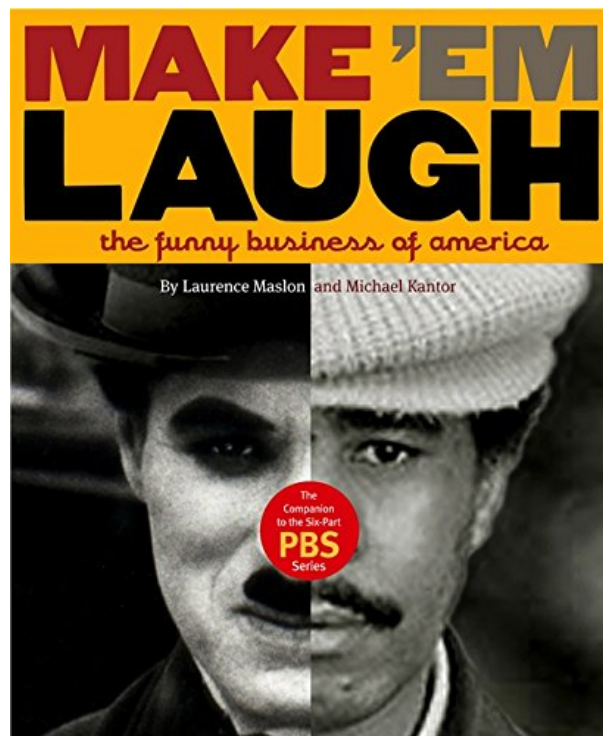
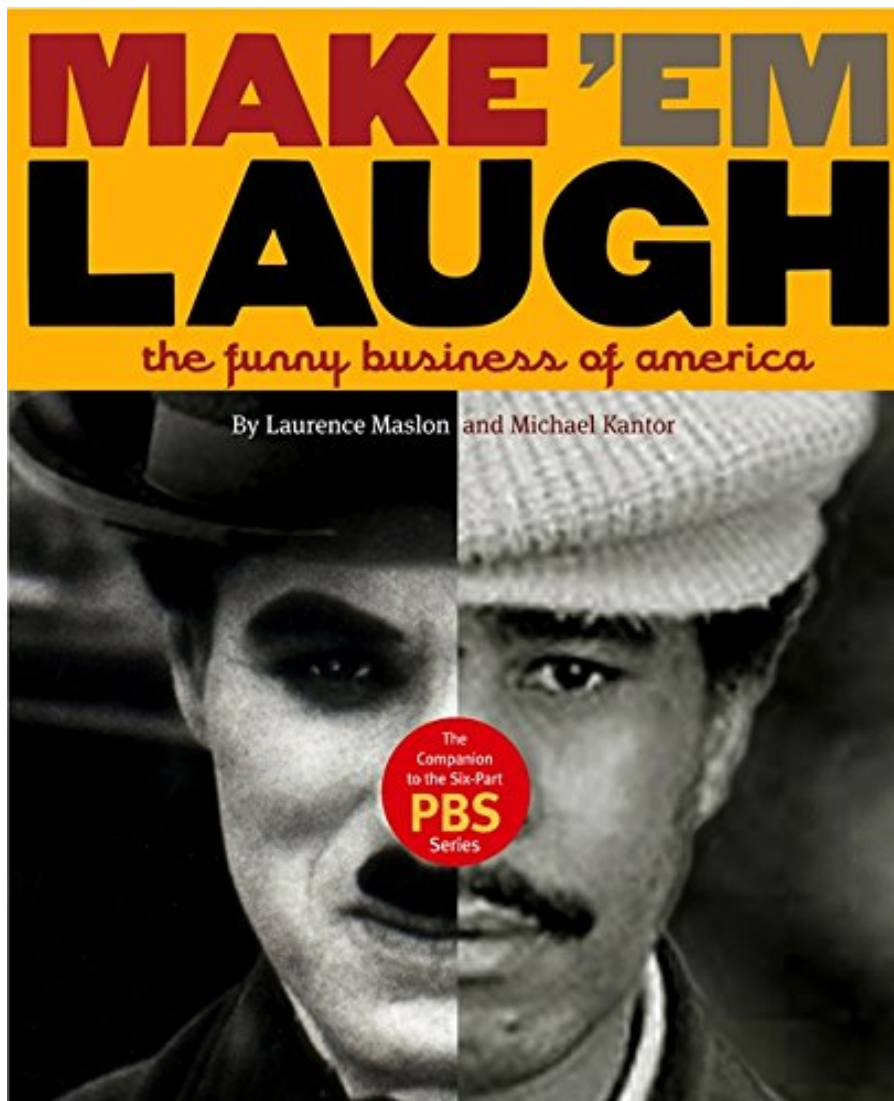


**MAKE 'EM LAUGH: THE FUNNY BUSINESS
OF AMERICA BY MICHAEL KANTOR,
LAURENCE MASLON**



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From Publishers Weekly

Kantor, who produced and directed the Emmy-winning *Broadway: The American Musical* for PBS in 2004, returns with a six-part PBS series on comedy. For this companion book, he teamed with NYU professor Maslon, editor of Library of America's George S. Kaufman collection. Their guide to guffaws and giggles ranges from silent film actors (Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton) to sitcoms (*Seinfeld*), satire (*Mad*, *SNL*) and stand-up comics (George Carlin, Lenny Bruce). Taking a scattershot approach with 60-plus performer profiles and sidebars, the resulting text is sometimes superficial with curious oversights; two decades of radio comedy get squeezed into three pages, so Amos 'n' Andy and Bob and Ray rate only a few paragraphs; Stan Freberg sold millions of records yet is dismissed in a single sentence. With hundreds of fascinating photographs, this book benefits from the TV series' extensive photo research, but what is certain to be a hilarious cascade of clips on PBS is a pratfall in print. (Dec. 2)

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From the most popular routines and the most ingenious physical shtick to the snappiest wisecracks and the most biting satire of the last century, MAKE 'EM LAUGH illuminates who we are as a nation by exploring what makes us laugh, and why. Authors Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor draw on countless sources to chronicle the past century of American comedy and the geniuses who created and performed it-melding biography, American history, and a lotta laughs into an exuberant, important book.

Each of the six chapters focuses a different style or archetype of comedy, from the slapstick pratfalls of Buster Keaton and Lucille Ball through the wiseguy put-downs of Groucho Marx and Larry David, to the incendiary bombshells of Mae West and Richard Pryor . And at every turn the significance of these comedians-smashing social boundaries, challenging the definition of good taste, speaking the truth to the powerful-is vividly tangible. MAKE 'EM LAUGH is more than a compendium of American comic genius; it is a window onto the way comedy both reflects the world and changes it-one laugh at a time.

Starting from the groundbreaking PBS series, the authors have gone deeper into the works and lives of America's great comic artists, with biographical portraits, archival materials, cultural overviews, and rare photos. Brilliantly illustrated, with insights (and jokes) from comedians, writers and producers, along with film, radio, television, and theater historians, MAKE 'EM LAUGH is an indispensable, definitive book about comedy in America.

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Most helpful customer reviews

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

A serious look at comedy

By Julie Neal

This big, beautiful book is the companion to the PBS series about what makes Americans laugh. It's not meant to be comprehensive, and it's not. But what is here is fascinating. Filled with photographs, it's easy to open to any page and begin reading. I couldn't put it down.

The book is separated into six chapters that explore different styles of comedy. There is lots of overlap, of course -- Harpo Marx would be at home in the "Oddball" segment, and Jon Stewart is certainly a "Smart-Aleck" -- but this convention makes it easy to put similar comedians together, and focus on why what they do makes us laugh.

There is lots of comedy here. The book is peppered with transcripts of comedy routines and television shows. Quotes from people in the industry, including writers, producers and other comedians, provide insight to what makes performers tick. Rare archival material includes a full page detailing The Sketch That Couldn't Be Done, written by Elaine May for The Smothers Brothers (it was considered in bad taste). If you want to know George Carlin's seven dirty words, they're all here.

In a sweeping book like this, lots will be left out. But I have a few personal peeves. The only mention of one of my favorites, Red Skelton, is to diss him in the segment about Buster Keaton: "(Keaton) spent the next two decades doing what work he could get as an off-camera gagman for stars like Red Skelton, who couldn't hold a candle to Keaton." Animated classic film comedies from Pixar such as Toy Story and Finding Nemo are ignored. And Garry Shandling merits only a mention in the Gilda Radner section, instead of being in a spotlight for The Larry Sanders Show. Worst of all, women are passed over routinely for guys: there are segments on 53 male comedians versus 9 for women. And that's not funny.

Here's the chapter list:

Introduction

1. Slip on a Banana Peel: The Knockabouts

Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel & Hardy, Harpo Marx, The Three Stooges, Lucille Ball, Jerry Lewis, Jim Carrey

Sock it to Me?: Satire and Parody

Will Rogers, Sid Caesar and Your Show of Shows, Tom Lehrer, Allan Sherman, Johnny Carson, Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In, Carol Burnett, Mel Brooks, Saturday Night Live, Billy Crystal, The Wayans Brothers, Jon Stewart and The Daily Show

Never Give a Sucker an Even Break: Smart-Alecks and Wiseguys

W.C. Fields, Groucho Marx, Jack Benny, Tim (The Kingfish) Moore, Phil Silvers, Paul Lynde, Redd Foxx, Joan Rivers, Eddie Murphy, Larry David

Would Ya Hit a Guy With Glasses?: Nerds, Jerks, Oddballs and Suckers

Harold Lloyd, Eddie Cantor, Bob Hope, Jonathan Winters, Phyllis Diller, Woody Allen, Cheech and Chong, Steve Martin, Gilda Radner, Robin Williams, Andy Kaufman

Honey, I'm Home!: Breadwinners and Homemakers

The Goldbergs, George Burns and Gracie Allen, The Honeymooners, The Dick Van Dyke Show, Norman Lear and All in the Family, The Odd Couple, Bill Cosby, Roseanne, Seinfeld, The Simpsons

When I'm Bad, I'm Better: The Groundbreakers

Mae West, Burlesque, Abbott and Costello, Moms Mabley, Fred Allen, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, The Smothers Brothers, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Bill Maher

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

A Good Read

By Conor Cunneen

A really good read. Make 'em Laugh provides excellent commentary on many of the people who made America and the world laugh.

This is the perfect book for anyone interested in the art of comedy, be they a humorous motivational keynote speaker, motivational humorist or not.

Broken into six sections:

The Knockabouts

Sock it to me / Parody

Never Give a Sucker an Even Break

Nerds, Jerks, Oddballs and Suckers

Honey I'm Home

The Groundbreakers

The authors provide crisp interesting biographies of almost all of the greats.

About the only obvious name missing for me was Bob Newhart. If comedy is tragedy separated by time, many of those portrayed were bound to have been comics given the unhappy or lonely childhood many experienced.

Interesting photography and some great quotes add to the overall good feel about this book. A great gift for someone who is into fun and good humor.

8 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

fun, but inadequate

By Richard S. Parker

I'll start by admitting that the book is fun. I finished it in two snowy days when schools were closed and, as a public school librarian, I had time on my hands. It covers a lot of ground. But there are real, fundamental, problems. First, the material is a bit centered on the "cult of personality." If the genre of comedy can't be pinned to specific individuals, it doesn't get much attention. The biggest hole in the book is a one-sentence description of screwball comedy. That's it. Where's *The Awful Truth*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Philadelphia Story* or *Twentieth Century*? Nowhere! This whole immensely influential and popular genre of comedy never gets its due; indeed, hardly gets a mention. With comedy, it's all a matter of taste. Who's great? Who's merely good? But, a book that gives Lucy three pages and Paul Lynde five has got to be taken with a grain of salt and a certain amount of healthy skepticism has to be applied to the text. And, that brings me to my final point. The authors are a little too free with hyperbolic praise. "Eddie Murphy remains the most successful comedian in American movies" is a statement that ought to be examined very carefully. There are other claims made in the book that should be taken with several large grains of salt. Enjoy the book for what it does present, remind yourself of the work of performers you've enjoyed over the years; but (and this is an ironic thing to say about a book on comedy) don't take the book too seriously.

See all 11 customer reviews...

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