

Book Review

Alleen Pace Nilsen and Don L.F. Nilsen *The Language of Humor: An Introduction*.
Cambridge University Press. 2019. pp. xiv, 387

Arthur Asa Berger*

Written in a highly readable, personable, and very accessible style, *The Language of Humor* is an important contribution to the study of humor. It is designed as a textbook, but because of its reader-friendly style, it will be of interest to anyone interested in humor and the way it has manifested itself in every aspect of life. The book's scope is enormous and the Nilsens leave no stone unturned when it comes to humor. It has twenty-four chapters covering humor found in areas such as Anthropology and Ethnic Studies, Business, Computer Science, History, Journalism, Gerontology, Law, Music, Philosophy, Politics, Religion and Sociology and many others as well. As a textbook, it is the complete package, containing study questions, called "Points of Departure," for each chapter and coming with PowerPoints for each chapter sent on a thumb drive. The authors played significant roles in the development of humor studies as an academic subject and the creation of a scholarly journal devoted to the study of humor—*Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* publisher by Mouton de Gruyter. *Humor* describes itself as an "international interdisciplinary forum for the publication of high-quality research on humor as an important and universal human faculty.

It is the universal nature of humor, the fact that we find it everywhere, that makes writing about it as a cultural phenomenon difficult. The categories of humor that the authors devote chapters to might seem a bit strange. We find chapters on irony and on computer science. On medicine and health and on names. They are all listed alphabetically, which suggests one can read the book in any order one wishes and that information in one chapter does not depend on earlier chapters. But whether the twenty-four chapters the authors chose to write about cover everything is not crucial. It is impossible to cover every aspect of humor since it is so ubiquitous. What is important is that the Nilsens deal with so many important aspects of humor which means that sometimes they include in one chapter material that might have also fit well in a different chapter and they have an enormous fund of knowledge about humor that we find in the book.

The authors often deal with experiences they've had with students and others involving humor during many decades of teaching courses and lecturing on various aspects of the subject. We see that the tone the Nilsens have adapted is conversational in nature, but that should not prevent us from recognizing there is a great deal of content in the book as well. We can describe the book as sugar coating, with humor, the didactic pill of scholarly research into the many aspects of humor and the countless areas where humor can be found. We have to recognize that humor is a much broader topic than jokes, which are generally

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defined as short narratives, meant to amuse, with a punch line. Jokes are a popular form of humor but only a small part of humorous discourse.

The authors have included many jokes and other examples of humor of every kind in the book. You find this humorous material in each chapter. Thus, in their chapter on psychology, they reprint some wonderful children's rhymes such as:

Jack and Jill went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

Jill forgot to take the pill

And now she's got a daughter.

You have to tip your hat to authors who have such a wide-ranging approach to humor, who know so much about so many aspects of humor. Is it an encyclopedia? Is it a textbook? Is it a book of humor with extended discussions of each humorous text or topic? Is it all of these things? *The Language of Humor: An Introduction* is both scholarly yet also a remarkably good read.