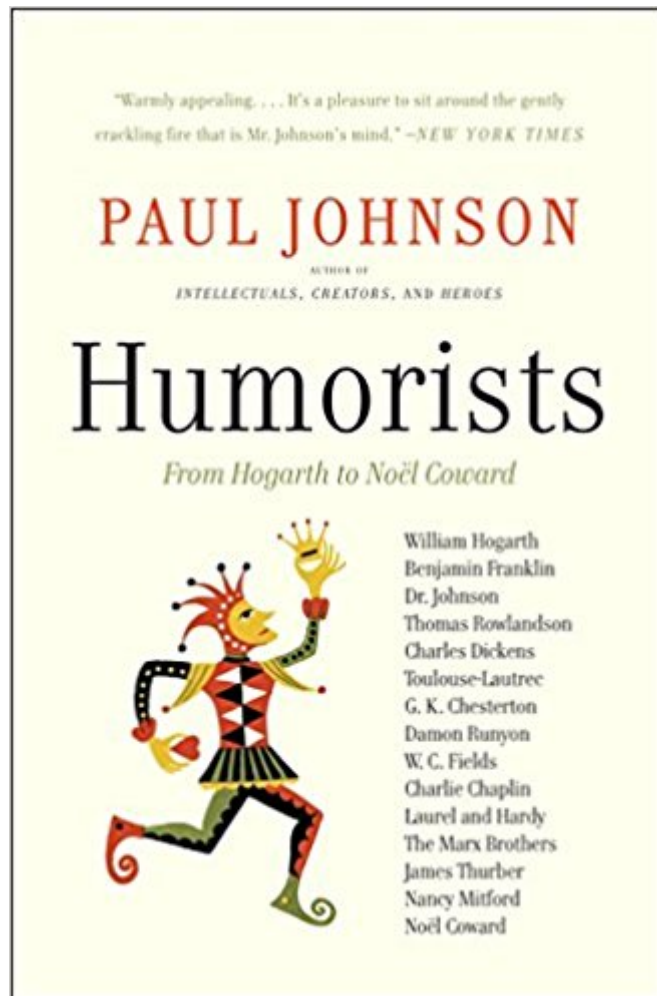




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# Humorists: From Hogarth To Noel Coward



## Synopsis

“It is Johnson’s gift that he can make his subjects human and fallible enough that we would recognize them instantly, while also illuminating what made them heroes.”  
• Washington Post Book World on Heroes  
“Johnson is a clear, intelligent, forceful writer, and nothing if not thorough.”  
• Wall Street Journal  
Paul Johnson, the acclaimed author of *Creators*, *Heroes*, and the New York Times bestseller *Intellectuals*, returns with a captivating collection of biographical portraits of the Western world’s greatest wits and humorists. With chapters dedicated to history’s sharpest tongues and most piercing pens, including Benjamin Franklin, Toulouse-Lautrec, G.K. Chesterton, Damon Runyan, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and many more, Johnson’s *Humorists* is an exciting compendium of our most enduring comical and satirical innovators.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

British historian Johnson (Churchill) misses the mark with this odd collection of biographical snapshots of "humorists"--the term is debatable--throughout Western history. Noting that laughter was first recorded in words in chapter 18 of the book of Genesis, Johnson divides humorists into two categories: those who create chaos for laughs and those who analyze the inherent oddness of individual personalities to find comedy. But instead of using this basic rubric--and all points of intersection--to explore the evolution of humor from the 18th century to our current one, Johnson's portraits of these so-called humorous men (Nancy Mitford is the only woman, and she shares a

chapter with Noël Coward) lose any sense of a central thesis. Particularly in the cases of painters Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, and Toulouse-Lautrec, Johnson's intense focus on minute details of works not reproduced in the text make his analysis difficult to grasp for readers unfamiliar with the artists' work. Chapters devoted to Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, and James Thurber are among the best, and in them Johnson is able to stifle his urge to overanalyze the biographical elements and let the subjects--and their amazing comedic work--speak for themselves. (Dec.) (c) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** Historian Johnson takes a serious and thoughtful look at humor, noting that laughter, when you analyze it, is no joke. He launches into an analysis of the pioneers of stand-up comedy, running gags, and one-liners from expected and unexpected sources: Shakespeare to Hogarth, Benjamin Franklin to Laurel and Hardy. He sees the genesis of comedy in either the creation of chaos (W. C. Fields, Groucho Marx, Evelyn Waugh, and James Thurber) or observations of human weirdness (Toulouse-Lautrec, George Bernard Shaw, and Damon Runyon). Chapters offer engaging sketches of the humorists and the life circumstances (some pretty dreadful) and personality quirks that drove their comic or tragicomic outlooks and works. G. K. Chesterton found great humor in the strivings of the Christian faith and reason to corral the human spirit, Charlie Chaplin meticulously plotted out his chaotic comic routines, and Charles Dickens reveled in verbal running gags. Other subjects of the droll, revealing profiles are Dr. Johnson, Thomas Rowlandson, Noël Coward, and Nancy Mitford. Johnson masterfully weaves a narrative line among the figures, many of whom don't spring to mind as comic, with a deep appreciation for their wit in writing, filmmaking, painting, and living. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**Warning! Watch your step today. It's April Fools' Day.** This day of practical jokes and jokesters is celebrated in the U.S., Europe, Australia, Brazil and Canada. For book lovers in other countries, look it up on Wikipedia. And did you know that Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the most successful comic in history? So today I bring you a very satisfying book/comedic journey from historian Paul Johnson who channels W.C. Fields: "We know what makes people laugh. We do not know why they laugh." Johnson, with his unique style of short historical chapters, elegant writing, and deep insights, delivers a cavalcade of comedy--while spotlighting an amazing list of humorists

and their secret formulas for making us laugh. "Broadly speaking," says Johnson, "humor is a matter of chaos or character." So here's a little April Fools' Day dessert for my more discriminating readers who delight in tickling various funny bones (their own and others). Warning! If you are a public speaker and think yourself witty--think again.

**LO! & LOL: ABRAHAM AND SARAH.** Paul Johnson says "the Old Testament contains 26 laughs, which do not form any particular pattern or expand our knowledge of why people laugh. The first occurs in chapter 17 of the book of Genesis, and is the first time a case of laughter was recorded in words, about 1500 BC." (It's when God appeared to Abraham. "Lo! Sarah, thy wife, shall have a son!" Read Johnson or Genesis for the punch line!)

**PRE-TWITTER: 1709-1784.** "The sayings of Dr. [Samuel] Johnson, which are memorable or at any rate remembered, amount to at least a thousand by my reckoning. The "Oxford Dictionary of Quotations" lists 276, which puts him fourth after Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, and Kipling." "He would often say, Mrs. Thrale records, `that the size of a man's Understanding might always be known by his Mirth.'"

**Johnson on Johnson:** "For neatness, profundity, or aptness, pith, and force, they are an unrivaled collection." "The author has high regard for humor. If you've read Johnson's other books (including "Churchill" and "Jesus: A Biography from a Believer."), you may be surprised. "In this series of books collecting together intellectuals, creators, and heroes, I reckon the comics are the most valuable."

**DICKENS: EGREGIOUS AND ECCENTRIC.** "Dickens was not a comic who raised a laugh by creating chaos. He was the other type: the comic who relies upon individual character. He looked at the mass of humanity and plucked out of it the egregious and the eccentric for our delight." "Chuckle along as you read Paul Johnson's pithy descriptions of Dickens' characters (more than 3,000 "adorn" Dickens' novels). And you'll be reminded of "the equally characteristic British device, the verbal running gag." (Were Leno or Lettermen devotees of Dickens?) "He took trouble over the names of inanimate objects too, especially places." Names like: Slamjam Coffee House, Willing Mind tavern, and the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Assurance Company. "The Tilted Wagon inn is yet another invented pub: Dickens complained that `real inn names are so peculiar it is hard to outdo them.'"

**BUT SERIOUSLY.** On G.K. Chesterton, "He never made a joke against the female sex, as such, because to GKC the act of making a joke was one of the most serious decisions you could possibly make, on a par with publishing a political manifesto, or a declaration of war." Chesterton remarked, "It is easier to make a man laugh at a bad joke, but more worthwhile to get a woman to laugh at a good joke."

**GAG ME WITH A SHOE.** Charlie Chaplin developed his craft (more than 50 gags) under Fred Karno, "probably the greatest instructor of every kind of comic talent who ever lived." Karno required six months to coach wanna-be comedians. Chaplin: "The best gags are the simple ones which look easy but require the most

rehearsal." Some of his best: funny walks in oversized shoes, stamp licking, and more. Sadly...Chaplin--and many others featured in this rare book--"was scarred for life by a sad and impoverished childhood, which left him with a monumental self-pity." Note: Johnson doesn't sugarcoat the dark side of these funny faces (Chaplin included). You may want to skip some chapters and profiles. Pastors, though, could profitably use the contrasts (hilarious versus hellish) in numerous sermons.<sup>3</sup> **CLERGYMEN WALK INTO A BAR.** If you're looking for a joke book, this is not it. If you'd enjoy a deep dive into a British historian's hunches on humor--have at it. Johnson profiles 15 humorists including Benjamin Franklin, G.K. Chesterton, Toulouse-Lautrec, W.C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, The Marx Brothers, James Thurber, Noel Coward, and others. He includes Groucho's famous line, "I don't want to belong to a club which would have me as a member." Let me close on this silly day with Johnson's commentary on political correctness gone amuck. "The future for humorists thus looks bleak, at the time I write this." (For example, here is NPR's headline today: "Trevor Noah, Jon Stewart's Replacement, Goes from Hero to Villain in 24 Hours.") P.S. Begin reading at the back of the book with Johnson's four-page color commentary on how he came to write "Humorists." Insightful and quotable.

British author Mr. Johnson's longevity allowed him a personal acquaintance with several of the original humorists recounted in this delightful book. His erudite perspective allows inclusion of seminal figures such as Hogarth and Rowlandson from centuries prior to the 20th, as well. Each of the featured characters gets a chapter describing his or her (comedy is not only a man's game; Groucho Marx and W. C. Fields are joined by female wits such as Dorothy Parker and Nancy Mitford) role in the evolution of timeless amusements via stage, screen and in print. The book's organization is ideal for the reader seeking to spend an hour or two at a sitting. The summation of each artist's era and impact is so thorough that it requires an index. At the conclusion of the book, Johnson leaves off with a helpful set of recommendations about the best reference works to consult on each of the principals. By the time a reader has reached that section, it is a sure bet that at least a few of these luminaries will capture his or her interest sufficiently to warrant deeper investigation. The pleasure that Paul Johnson takes in his own erudition suffuses his book with a soaring sense of enjoyment that strikes a perfect note for such a treatment.

What is a humorist? This book profiles people as diverse as Benjamin Franklin and Stan Laurel. They might capitalize on human quirks or just do amusing things with their hands. They each have a unique style, based on observation interpreted with wit. The reader may not be trying to analyze

humor, but it does become clear that humor is largely about human absurdity and the unexpected. Each chapter is based on research and a thoughtful assessment of an artist's work. They truly are artists, and they deserve historic recognition for lightening the human spirit and bringing us pleasure.

Paul Johnson applies his broad scholarly talent to studying many of the most humorous individuals of the 20th and earlier centuries. His discussions of such humorists and comedians as Benjamin Franklin, Charles Dickens, Damon Runyon, W. C. Fields and Samuel Johnson are superb. I particularly enjoyed this book because it gives an extensive cultural analysis related to the development of each character.

The best historical writer alive.

Short, crisp, and well written. Each anecdote within this lively volume is amusing, interesting, and memorable. If I could complain, I'd simply say it was too short! I wanted Johnson to cover more comedians. I was upset that PG Wodehouse didn't get his own chapter--though he was mentioned a lot.

Great item

Interesting book

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