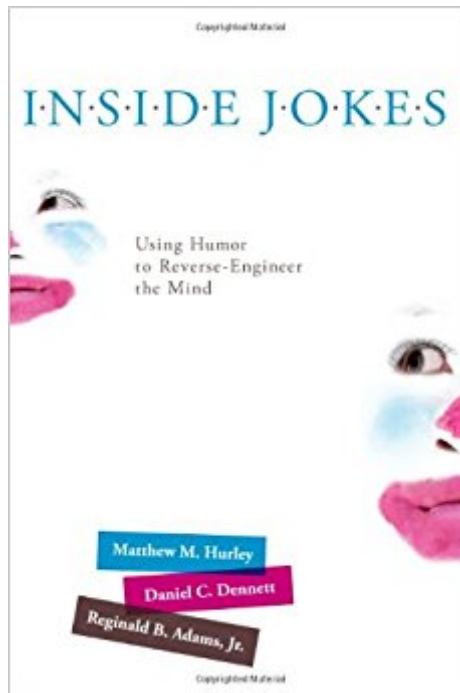




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Inside Jokes: Using Humor To Reverse-Engineer The Mind



Synopsis

Some things are funny -- jokes, puns, sitcoms, Charlie Chaplin, The Far Side, Malvolio with his yellow garters crossed -- but why? Why does humor exist in the first place? Why do we spend so much of our time passing on amusing anecdotes, making wisecracks, watching The Simpsons? In *Inside Jokes*, Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams offer an evolutionary and cognitive perspective. Humor, they propose, evolved out of a computational problem that arose when our long-ago ancestors were furnished with open-ended thinking. Mother Nature -- aka natural selection -- cannot just order the brain to find and fix all our time-pressured misleaps and near-misses. She has to bribe the brain with pleasure. So we find them funny. This wired-in source of pleasure has been tickled relentlessly by humorists over the centuries, and we have become addicted to the endogenous mind candy that is humor.

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Customer Reviews

Ever since Plato (who thought we laugh at vice), thinkers as serious as Kant and Freud have put forth theories of our giggles and guffaws. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams go at the problem with the ingenuity of first-rate scientists and the timing of first-rate comics. Not only do they have the riches of evolutionary psychology from which to draw, but they're even funnier than Hegel. (Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, author of *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*) The deft use of humor can win a mate, persuade an audience, or make a tyrant quake in his jackboots. Yet

no one really understands why the human brain should respond so forcefully to that cocktail of anomaly, indignity, and rhythmic vocalization we call a joke. Hurley, Dennett, and Adams offer a sophisticated analysis of this important phenomenon using high standards of evolutionary explanation -- and no, it is not a turgid academic disquisition, but written with clarity, good cheer, and, of course, wit. (Steven Pinker, author of *How The Mind Works*)[O]ne of the most complex and sophisticated humor theories ever presented.... The authors should be lauded for their thought-provoking and original work. (*Evolutionary Psychology*)The theory [the authors] elaborate is a detailed and sophisticated descendant of incongruity theories.... The learned and even-handed stance adopted by [them] regarding problem cases is... upbeat: they regard their theory as a provisional staging post, and a prompt to further empirical enquiry into these open-ended issues. On balance, that is probably the right attitude to take. (*The Times Literary Supplement*) Inside Jokes is the most persuasive theory of humor in the centuries that scientists have been trying to explain why we crack up. Extra bonus: unlike most such research, which is about as funny as a root canal, Hurley's analysis is -- and I don't think I'm going out on too much of a limb here -- the funniest thing the MIT Press... has ever published (in a good way). (Sharon Begley *The Daily Beast*)Science advances by asking new questions, and Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams raise a lot of them.... Some of these questions have been asked before, but no previous attempt succeeds in answering so many so well. (Walter Sinnott-Armstrong *Science*)Hurley and his crew cross the road to not just explain a joke, but explain all jokes. Before this book the only comedy that had been peer reviewed and replicated in double-blind experiments was the theory that there's nothing funnier than a smoking monkey. I'm so glad smart people outside of comedy are taking comedy seriously. (Penn Jillette of "Penn & Teller")MIT Press has come up with a page-turner, a book you can't put down. That is no joke! The authors have dissected the mental state of humor and, instead of dismissing it, instill awe about the beauty of the evolved human mind. Humor at its various levels cleans up our act and plays a magnificent role in making us who we are. (Michael Gazzaniga, Director, Sage Center for the Study of Mind, University of California, Santa Barbara)What's so funny about a robot with a sense of humor? In this highly original analysis, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams try to locate the holy grail, the essence of a joke, by using a variety of tools (from computer science, cognitive science, linguistics, philosophy, and even evolutionary psychology) to dissect why we laugh. This powerful team of authors goes a long way to explain why and when we laugh, and in doing so uncover insights about how the mind works. But like the proverbial millipede who, trying to analyze how he lifts each of his legs in the precise sequence, starts tripping over, readers should beware that getting inside a joke risks dehumorizing it! (Simon

Baron-Cohen, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology and Director, Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University)

Matthew M. Hurley is currently researching teleology and agency at the Center for Research on Concepts and Cognition at Indiana University. Daniel C. Dennett is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. He is the author of *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness* (MIT Press) and other books. Reginald B. Adams, Jr., is Associate Professor of Psychology researching emotion and social perception at Penn State University.

This book examines the science of why we find funny what we find funny. Most people probably feel about this as did E.B. White who said, "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it." Still, while analyzing humor may not be as fun as reveling in it, it's fascinating to scientifically inquiring minds. Humor is universal (not the humor of a specific joke, but the experience of somethings being humorous.) A skilled science fiction writer might conjure up an alien race that is credibly humorless. But it defies credulity that even the remotest of aboriginal Earthling wouldn't giggle or guffaw at the sight of an off-course ball careening into an unsuspecting man's crotch. Humor's universality begs certain questions. First and foremost, one expects there to be some evolutionary advantage to a sense of humor. That evolutionary mechanism is precisely what Hurley, Dennett, and Adams attempt to demonstrate in this book. The authors suggest that the pleasure associated with humor is a reward for recognizing an incongruity, and they go into great deal to fill in the details needed to explain the panoply of things people find funny, while suggesting why alternate explanations are inferior. While there's a lot of frog-killing academic analytics and needlessly messy scholarly language, this book does offer a vast collection of examples of humor to support and clarify the authors' points. So, unlike many books on evolutionary and cognitive science, this book does have a built in light side. WARNING: there's also a discussion of why some attempts at humor fail. This means one is also subjected to a number of puns, elementary school jokes, and comedic misfires that show the reader why sometimes humor implodes. The book starts by building a common understanding of what humor is. It turns out that this isn't simple because people find many different kinds of things funny--from caricatures to wordplay. (And, whatever the initial evolutionary purpose of humor, our species has run with that reward system to places that couldn't have

been readily anticipated.) Next, the authors discuss the many varieties of theories of humor that have been raised. This subject has been studied for some time, and thinkers have suggested that humor's pleasure derives from a number of different causes from feeling superior to recognizing surprise--just to name a couple. After considering the competition, Hurley et. al. start laying out the basis of a cognitive / evolutionary explanation. In chapter five they describe 20 questions they think must be dealt with, and--in the last chapter (13)--they give their responses as a summation of the book's main points. Along the way, the authors take on important related questions such as why humor sometimes fails, what others will see as the weakness of their argument, whether a robot could be humorous, and why we laugh. The last point opens another can of worms. Even if one concludes--as the authors have--that humor is a reward system for recognizing incongruities, the question of why there is an advantage to spontaneously announcing that recognition still arises. There are a few graphics in the book, mostly these are cartoons and humorous photos that serve as examples. The book is published by MIT Press, so all the usual scholarly features of notes and citations apply. I found this book to be thought-provoking, and the plentiful examples of jokes made it enjoyable to read as well. I'd recommend it for those interested in the science of the mind. It's a bit dry in places for readers looking for light reading about humor.

This is an interesting subject but the book is incomprehensible to any but experts in brain science. It's full of jargon, and the aim seems to be to use big words rather than communicate. I wanted to like it.

This book deserves a lot more attention than it has received. It gives a scientifically grounded theory of humor, based on evolutionary theory and cognitive science. According to this theory, humor is a cognitive function. When you perceive something to be humorous, the brain has detected a faulty conclusion, resulting in mirthful reward. By reading this book, you'll not only learn a lot about how humor works, but also get a fascinating look into the science of the mind. However, the book is not a very easy read. But its original and thorough explanation of humor weigh up for it. Humor has been discussed by many thinkers throughout history, and this book is the most complete attempt at explaining it yet.

Excellent book! In explaining how mind "sees" humor, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams reveal much about the inner working of our mind generally.

This book is an attempt to figure out why we like jokes: why do we perceive things as funny and what evolutionary function does humor have? How did we develop funnybones and what for? The primary, or first, author is Hurley, who wrote it as his doctoral thesis at Tufts under the tutelage of Dennett, a distinguished philosopher of such matters, and Adams, a professor of psychology at Penn State. It's a worthwhile book, and in passages even lively, but it bears the mark of a revised dissertation, primarily in its exhaustiveness and in a certain scholarly tone. Numerous jokes are interspersed throughout the book. Some are good, some less good and a few horrible. Most are new but some are as old as the hills. For the most part, they serve an explanatory purpose. Some are apt, particularly this one, which is at the heading of the final chapter: There are two kinds of people in this world: Those who require closure. That joke works so well not only because it's funny but because it highlights how our brains work in the presence of incomplete information. We are Closure Machines. We leap to complete things even in the presence of unfinished data. And that's the background for Hurley et al.'s theory of how humor works in the brain and why a sense of humor is there. Humor is, to borrow Stephen Jay Gould's term, a spandrel: a device thrown up during our long evolution to humanhood to serve another purpose and now left over to function on its own. In this case, the original purpose was to provide reward to us as we sifted through belief commitments we had previously made to see if they held up in the light of subsequent knowledge. It's a reward for a time-consuming and sometimes difficult cognitive behavior. In general, it is to our advantage to leap to conclusions even if the information isn't all in yet: we use less computational energy and space doing things that way and move to reaction quicker (which may mean our survival). But we clutter our brains with a lot of wrong knowledge which may need to be weeded out later. Our sense of humor evolved out of the pleasure reaction we got when we took on that work of weeding and it is linked to our awareness of incongruity. Out of that flows a lot of knowledge about the nature of humor and of jokes. I won't go into it but it makes interesting reading. Think of how jokes make you reframe assumptions you make as the joke is being told. Like this one: What did the 0 say to the 8? "Nice belt." Now you see what reframing entails. Part of it is throwing out no longer valid conclusions you tentatively accepted earlier in the joke. Your reward for doing it is the laugh you gave when you finally figured out the joke.

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