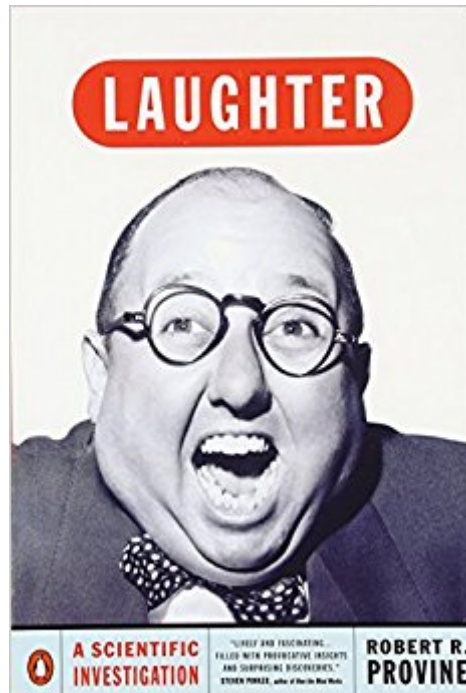


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Laughter: A Scientific Investigation



Synopsis

Do men and women laugh at the same things? Is laughter contagious? Has anyone ever really died laughing? Is laughing good for your health? Drawing upon ten years of research into this most common-yet complex and often puzzling-human phenomenon, Dr. Robert Provine, the world's leading scientific expert on laughter, investigates such aspects of his subject as its evolution, its role in social relationships, its contagiousness, its neural mechanisms, and its health benefits. This is an erudite, wide-ranging, witty, and long-overdue exploration of a frequently surprising subject.

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Customer Reviews

Is it really the best medicine? Neurobiologist Robert R. Provine discovered that no scientist had ever looked into the weird, uncontrollable, and very human phenomenon of laughter, so he started off on his own. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* is his warm and--of course--funny report on how and why we giggle and snort with such regularity. Basing his views on field research conducted in a broad array of social situations (laughter being notoriously difficult to evoke in the laboratory), Provine posits that we use it as a universal, preverbal means of communication. Though animal research is controversial, it suggests that apes establish and maintain relationships using laughlike behavior, so it could be the missing link between animal communication and true language. He also explores instances in which we seem to laugh our way into and out of social situations, and includes a list of tips for keeping the laughs flowing. The irony of the scientific community not taking laughter seriously isn't lost on Provine, and he takes every opportunity to remind his fellows that even the

seemingly most trivial matters can hide the most profound truths. If that isn't funny, what is? --Rob Lightner --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

One morning the principal's voice sounded over the intercom of my high school with the shocking announcement that a popular French teacher had just died in front of his class. Everyone fell silent. While the principal went on to explain that it had been a heart attack, I couldn't keep myself from a laughing fit. To this day, I feel embarrassed. What is it about laughter that makes it unstoppable even if triggered by circumstances that aren't amusing? Extreme bouts of laughter are positively worrisome, marked by loss of motor control, shedding of tears, gasping for air, even the wetting of pants while rolling on the floor! What a weird trick has been played on our linguistic species to express itself with such stupid "ha ha ha" sounds. Why don't we leave it at a cool "that was funny"? These questions are old, going back to philosophers who have puzzled over why one of humanity's finest achievements--its sense of humor--is expressed in such an animal-like fashion. There can be no doubt that laughter is an inborn characteristic. It is a universal human expression that we share with our closest animal relatives, the apes. This was already known to Charles Darwin and confirmed by a Dutch ethologist, Jan van Hooff, who set out to elucidate under which circumstances apes utter their hoarse, puffing laughing sounds. He concluded that laughter is associated with a playful attitude in both humans and apes, even though play is considerably more physical (such as tickling and wrestling) in apes. *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* builds on this work in that it assumes animal origins of laughter and follows van Hooff's distinction between the laugh and the smile. The two expressions are often mentioned in the same breath because they tend to grade into each other, yet they derive from quite different primate displays, with the smile expressing affection and appeasement rather than playfulness. Robert R. Provine has set himself the task of cracking the laugh code, as he calls it, rather than tackling the much more complex issue of humor. The two may appear inseparable, but one of the revelations of this book is that the stand-up comedy model of laughter as a response to jokes is mistaken. The large majority of laughs measured by Provine and his students in the shopping malls and on the sidewalks of the human natural habitat occurred after statements that were far from humorous. In spontaneous social contacts, people burst into laughter at unfunny comments such as "I see your point" and "Put those cigarettes away" far more often than at funny ones, such as "He tried to blow his nose, but he missed." This shows that humor is not the issue: social relationships probably are. Laughter is a loud display that much of the time seems to signal mutual liking and well-being. Some of its uses are unique to our species, such as the guffaws of bonding. When a group of people laugh, sometimes at the expense of outsiders, they

broadcast solidarity and togetherness not unlike a howling pack of wolves. According to Vanderbilt University psychologist Jo-Anne Bachorowski [see "More Than the Best Medicine," News and Analysis, Scientific American, August], the unifying function of laughter is particularly clear among men. Provine expands on this theme with the observation that women laugh more in response to men's remarks than the reverse. The asymmetry between the sexes starts early in life, between boys and girls, and seems to be cross-cultural. The man as laugh-getter also turned up in an analysis of personal ads, in which Provine found that women generally sought partners with a sense of humor, which male advertisers claimed to have in great measure. Provine's well-written, often amusing and always fascinating exposé presents laughter in all its complexity and with all its contradictions. He does not try to sell us a one-issue explanation the way so many have tried before, such as that humor is a celebration of the detection of incongruity (Schopenhauer), an expression of derision (Hobbes), a safety valve for pent-up energy (Freud), and so on. Provine notes the armchair background of these high-flung notions and makes no secret that even after all his research he still finds laughter a baffling behavior that can be both hostile (as in ethnic jokes) and congenial and both a response to subtle humor and triggered by something as banal as a laughing box or a Tickle Me Elmo doll. The amazing contagiousness of laughter even works across species. Below my Office window at the Yerkes primate center, I often hear chimpanzees laugh when they tickle one another (they have the same tickling spots as we do: under their armpits and on their bellies), and I cannot suppress a chuckle in response. Tickle matches must be the original context of laughter, and the fact that tickling oneself is notoriously ineffective attests to its social significance. Tickling and laughter are essentially play patterns, with the latter having achieved a considerably expanded meaning in our species. The book reads like a first exploration of a behavior so common that it has been overlooked by science. As Provine notes, it may not be good for one's reputation to study jokes and laughter. In his eagerness to claim this new field for himself, however, the author neglects to mention people who went before him or who are currently tackling the same domain. For example, the pioneering work of van Hooff is buried in a footnote, even though it addressed some of the same points 25 years earlier. Toward the book's end, the author discusses neural disorders associated with laughter and laughing epidemics as well as the opposite: the healing power of laughter exploited by some churches and therapists. It is obvious that his research not only opens new avenues into human social life but also carries mental health implications. My own reaction to the death of a teacher was only a mild case of laughter under odd circumstances compared with the clinical, sometimes fatal cases reviewed here. The fact that we can lose control over this expression, that it may become mirthless, tragic, eerie, sly or sardonic, shows how close

comedy can get to tragedy. We like to see ourselves as fully rational beings, but much of this dissolves when someone yanks our laughing muscle. FRANS B. M. DE WAAL, author of Chimpanzee Politics and Good Natured, is director of the Living Links Center at the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center in Atlanta and professor of psychology at Emory University. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Bought for a class, has some very interesting facts in here.

This is the best book I've read providing scientific perspectives on laughter and tickling. An empirical eye, a scientists facility with observation and experimentation, and a broad understanding of social sciences, neuroscience, and evolution make this the most comprehensive and best substantiated book on laughter and tickling available. If these are topics near and dear and fascinating, you won't be disappointed with insights, discoveries, inspired, titillated and intrigued by new paths to consider and for researchers to further explore.

It was a gift to my son so I really haven't read it, but he is always laughing when he reads it!

I thought it might be funny---wrong!

The results presented are really interesting and the most important: they're not guesses. A set of scientific conclusions, based on scientific methods, is presented. Great work.

I was enrolled in Laughter & Humor, a course taught at UMBC by Robert R. Provine (author of the book) and I dropped the class after only two-weeks of enrollment. The book is written like a textbook but is structured in a novel format. The chapters are very short, but the amount of detail within one paragraph makes it nearly impossible to know what to study. When discussing the first exam, Provine suggested that we just read and analyze every sentence from Chapters One thru Three. This book is no laughing matter!

It's a REALLY informative book; if you're doin' a paper or someth'n, but if you're try'n to learn to be funny, like I am, it's not really helpful - interesting, but not what I was looking for.

I did a serious study of humor in grad school when I came across Provine's work. Besides being

humorless, his "experiments" in humor, the testing methods, and his conclusions were the only laughable thing in the text. Read Dr. Fry. He's worlds better if you're serious about the field of humor and how it really works.

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