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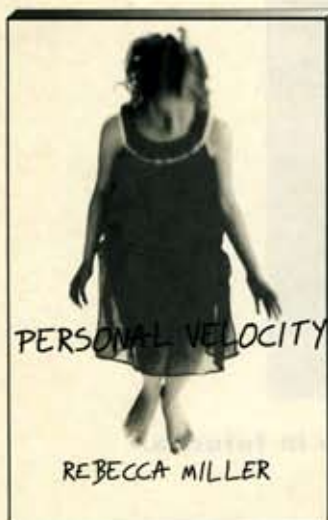
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DEPT. OF HUMOR

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

A scientific attempt to discover why we laugh.

BY TAD FRIEND

One Saturday evening in late June, the master of ceremonies at the Ice House, a comedy club in Pasadena, California, told the audience that they were in for a special treat: Dr. Richard Wiseman, a British scientist who was on a quest to determine the world's funniest joke, was going to come out and enlist the audience's help. The m.c., Debi Gutierrez, would tell jokes that particularly appealed to Americans who had visited Wiseman's humor Web site, and he would tell jokes favored by the British.

Wiseman bounded up and perched on a stool facing Gutierrez, a brassy woman in her early forties. "May I call you Richard?" she asked.

"You can call me what you want," Wiseman said.

"Dr. Dick!" she said. The audience whooped, and Wiseman offered a game smile. In a navy-blue T-shirt, khakis, and tortoise-rimmed glasses, with a Vandyke beard balancing his baldness, he looked like a particularly helpful store manager at the Gap. In fact, at the age of thirty-five, Wiseman—a professor at the University of Hertfordshire and the director of its Perrott-Warrick Research Unit—is Britain's most recognizable psychologist, famous for such mass-participation experiments as determining whether people can most easily detect lies told on television, on the radio, or in print. (It's on the radio.) Since last fall, he has been conducting a global humor study at LaughLab.co.uk, a Web site where visitors submit jokes and rate other people's jokes on a five-point scale called, somewhat unrigorously, the Gigglemeter. When the experiment began, Wiseman posed for publicity photographs wearing a lab coat and holding a clipboard as he scrutinized a student wearing a chicken suit who was crossing a road. One photographer shouted, "Could the guy playing the scientist move to the left?" and Wiseman cried, "I am a scientist."

The experiment was so popular—the LaughLab site got three million hits in

the first five days—that Wiseman's server blew out. He now has a repository of forty thousand jokes, some two-thirds of which are so racist, violent, or dirty that he can't post them for the site's visitors, a good number of whom, judging by their submissions ("What's brown and sticky? A stick!" cropped up three hundred and fifty-three times), won't be eligible for membership in the Friars Club for some years to come.

At the Ice House, Gutierrez read a Viagra joke and botched the punch line. Then it was Wiseman's turn. He is not a joke-teller by nature, and his recital was almost apologetic: "Guy goes to the doctor, who gives him a checkup. 'How long have I got to live, doc?' 'Ten.' 'Ten what? Weeks? Months?' 'Ten, nine, eight . . .'"

There are many ways that people laugh in a comedy club. There's what you might call the Anticipator ("He just mentioned Monica Lewinsky! This'll be great!"), the Clapper ("It's about time someone called bin Laden a terrorist!"), the Aficionados' Simper, the Coerced Snicker, the You-Crossed-the-Line "Ooh" (reserved for a Kennedy joke), the Gut Buster, and so forth. But there's only one kind of silence.

Gutierrez, referring to her notes, tried a feeble sally about a preacher. Gloom settled over the room. So she put her script aside and barked, "Two faggots and a midget walk into a bar—"The audience cracked up for four long, joyous seconds. Comedians relish a two-second laugh; four seconds is standup gold.

Why, after a string of failed jokes, such a big laugh? It's hard to say. Comedy theorists—philosophers, psychologists, comedy writers, and, most recently, neurologists—have yet to resolve even such seemingly simple questions as where knock-knock jokes come from, why you can't tickle yourself, and whether any woman anywhere, ever, has appreciated the Three Stooges. Technically, Gutierrez's remark wasn't a joke but a setup to

a joke, and a hostile, slurring setup at that. In 1993, Robert R. Provine, a behavioral neuroscientist, conducted a study of laughter in social settings—basically, he eavesdropped at cocktail parties—and discovered that the biggest laugh-getters were not punch lines or bons mots but such you-had-to-be-there remarks as “I’ll see you guys later” and “Must be nice!” and “You just farted!”

In other words, something’s being “funny” is not an adequate explanation of laughter. Is humor a temperament or a talent? Is it innate and individual and evolutionarily adaptive, or learned and cultural and gloriously pointless? “What does laughter mean?” the French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote in 1901. “The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation.” Unfortunately, Aristotle’s treatise on laughter, which might have settled the whole matter, was lost to history.

Richard Wiseman told me that his own efforts to advance humor theory had begun almost in jest. “I was asked if I had any ideas for the government’s Science Year,” Wiseman said, “and I instantly thought, World’s funniest joke! With one sentence, you’ve sold the project. Of course, the idea of scientifically determining the world’s funniest joke is completely ridiculous. People thought we’d have a computer that would tell you ‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’ is objectively a 4 on a scale of 5. And the point is that you can’t get a computer to do it—humor is a thoroughly human activity, and very, very hard to explain.”

And yet as Wiseman began combing through his site’s top two thousand jokes, preparing to announce his findings this fall, he was nagged by patterns. At times, comedy seems reminiscent of mathematics: as John Allen Paulos observed in his book “Mathematics and Humor,” both disciplines prize ingenuity, concision, literal-mindedness, and the use or misuse of logical notions such as presupposition, disguised equivalence, non sequitur, and reductio ad absurdum. Wiseman found that joke themes kept recurring, too. “There seem to be only about four jokes that come up all the time,” he told me. “Someone trying to



Comedians and comedy writers believe that comedy is more art than science.

look clever and taking a pratfall. Husbands and wives not being loving. Doctors being insensitive about imminent death. And God making a mistake.

“We’ve learned one thing for sure, though,” he continued. “Comparing scores for the same joke with different animals inserted in it, we found that the funniest animal of all is a duck. So science has determined that, if you’re going to tell a talking-animal joke, make it a duck.”

How the body laughs is well understood. Amusement initiates the coordinated action of fifteen facial muscles, beginning with a lift of the eyebrows and a series of eye- and cheek-muscle contrac-

tions known as the “surprise response.” What follows are spasmodic skeletal muscle contractions, a quickened heartbeat, and rapid breathing. The diaphragm contracts in clonic movements that crescendo and then diminish. (The “ha ha ho ho he” laugh is common, but you never hear “ha ho ha ho ha” or “he ho he.”)

How the brain processes humor remains a mystery. It’s easy to make someone smile or cry by electronically stimulating a single region of the brain, but it’s astonishingly difficult to make someone laugh. The “laughter circuit” is complex and various. Puns are processed on the left side of the brain by gyri, bumpy areas on the surface of the cerebral cortex; more



complex, non-wordplay jokes are routed through gyri on the right side of the brain and also trigger electronic activity in many other parts of the brain.

One way of thinking about this is that the left side of the brain cognitively "sets up" the joke and the right side emotionally "gets it." In a 1981 paper in *Brain and Language*, the researchers Wendy Warner, Suzanne Hamby, and Howard Gardner concluded that the left hemisphere of the brain is a "highly efficient, but narrowly programmed linguistic computer; in contrast the right hemisphere constitutes a suitable audience for a humorous silent film." They explained, "While the left hemisphere might appreciate some of Groucho's puns, and the right hemisphere might be entertained by the antics of Harpo, only the two hemispheres united can appreciate a whole Marx Brothers routine." Neither hemisphere, apparently, thinks much of Chico.

In the early sixties, Lenny Bruce inaugurated a routine that stunned audiences in San Francisco and New York clubs. One evening, Bruce's short riff convulsed the crowd for an astounding seventeen seconds:

"If you've, er, [pause] ever seen this bit before, I want you to tell me. Stop me if you've seen it. [Long pause] I'm going to piss on you."

History's first humor theory offers a compelling explanation for how Bruce's joke worked. "Superiority theory" began with Plato and Aristotle, but Thomas Hobbes provided its first full explanation in "Leviathan," published in 1651: laughter, he wrote, is provoked by the "sudden glory" attending a perception of one's own mighty powers "or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another." According to superiority theory, the audience loved Bruce's joke because it identified with him, the swaggering aggressor—or, alternatively, because Bruce was suddenly revealed as beneath contempt. (Audiences have felt superior to the people who make them laugh since at least the Middle Ages, when dwarves and hunchbacks were used as court jesters. A 1976 study found that when subjects were asked to characterize American comedians, people often said "skinny," "fat," "ugly," "clumsy," "stupid," "weird," or "deformed.")

"Incongruity theory," the most widely accepted humor doctrine today, was born in the seventeenth century, when Blaise Pascal wrote, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees." According to incongruity theory, in the joke "I went to my

doctor for shingles—he sold me aluminum siding," our (tiny) pleasure arises in two stages: surprise and then coherence. The seeming story line of the joke (the doctor will treat shingles, the disease) collapses, but we instantly realize that the anomaly can be explained by another story line (the doctor sells shingles, the product).

A few years ago, an Austrian psychologist and humor researcher named Willibald Ruch suggested that there is a third stage after the surprise and coherence stages. (Ruch is the president of an academic group called the International Society for Humor Studies; at the I.S.H.S.'s annual conference this summer, presentations included "One of the Last Vestiges of Gender Bias: The Characterization of Women Through the Telling of Dirty Jokes in 'Ally McBeal'" and "Connection Between Sense of Humor and Well Being at Work of Finnish Police Officers.") In this new wrinkle on incongruity theory, the third stage is "detecting that actually what makes sense . . . is pleasant nonsense," that "the ability to 'make sense,' to solve problems, has been 'misused'—and this feeling is generally associated with pleasure." This third-stage realization, Ruch says, is what makes us laugh. Forty years ago, well before the advent of insult comics like Sam Kinison and Andrew Dice Clay, we didn't expect a comedian to suddenly and nonsensically threaten to piss on us, so incongruity theory offers a convincing explanation for the success of Lenny Bruce's joke.

"Release theory," which still has its adherents, holds that humor mines repressed sources of pleasure in the unconscious. Its leading proponent was Sigmund Freud, who, in "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" (1905), declared that jokes are our way of expressing otherwise taboo wishes (sleeping with your mother, killing your father, etc.). John Limon, in his recent book "Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America," suggested that comedy arises from "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of . . . blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse." Lenny Bruce's aggressive peeing joke fits well with Freud's notions, too.

Henri Bergson, a contemporary of Freud, proposed the related notion of machine theory to explain why something is funny. Bergson suggested that we

laugh at other people's rigidity, at the "mechanical encrusted on something living." As the comedian Mike Myers observed in an e-mail to me, "Comedy characters tend to be a _____ machine; i.e., Clouseau was a *smug* machine, Pepe Le Pew was a *love* machine, Felix Unger was a *clean* machine, and Austin Powers is a *sex* machine."

In recent years, evolutionary biologists have turned the focus from what makes us laugh to why we bother. The neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran, in "Phantoms in the Brain" (1998), written with Sandra Blakeslee, provided incongruity theory with a nifty evolutionary rationale. Ramachandran suggested that laughter occurs as a result of a spurious threat: the insular cortex signals something alarming and then the anterior cingulate gyrus, which detects incongruities, responds, "Don't worry, no threat." Ramachandran and Blakeslee write, "The main purpose of laughter might be to allow the individual to alert others in the social group (usually kin) that the detected anomaly is trivial, nothing to worry about."

Because most of these theories apply equally well to Lenny Bruce's joke and to many other comic situations—and therefore equally badly—a few eccentrics have chosen to chart their own paths. The most famous of the rogue explorers is Del Close, a mentor to John Belushi, John Candy, Bill Murray, and Mike Myers. Close co-founded Chicago's ImprovOlympic, a theatre for sketch artists, and he and his

creative partner, Charna Halpern, devised the influential long-form group-improvisational technique known as "the Harold." Close also dreamed up the comedy-sketch program "Second City TV," ran light shows for the Grateful Dead, and smoked a truly staggering amount of pot. He died of emphysema in 1999, at the age of sixty-four.

A few months ago, I went to Chicago to take a look at Close's notebook, which contained an attempt at a unifying theory. I met Charna Halpern at the ImprovOlympic, where she still trains comedic actors, down the street from Wrigley Field. We sat in the empty theatre and discussed Close's insight into why comedy relies on patterns of three. There is a long-standing tradition—Leo McCarey, who directed the early Laurel and Hardy films, called it "almost an unwritten rule"—that jokes work best when there are two straightforward examples, to establish a pattern, and then a third, to shatter it. ("My favorite books are 'Moby-Dick,' 'Great Expectations,' and 'Rock Hard Abs in Thirty Days.'") The "rule of three" also holds that a running gag should be called back three times. The joke begins losing its savor the fourth time (and then, according to "comedy torture theory," becomes funny again about the seventh time, as the audience realizes that the performer is being deliberately exasperating).

"Del's theory was that we have three brains," Halpern said. "The joke is got

first by our reptile brain, which appreciates slapstick, then by our mammalian brain," which, Close believed, handles wants and needs. (The few documented instances of animal humor are physical in nature. The researcher Roger Fouts reported in 1997 that Washoe, a chimpanzee he had taught to sign, once urinated on him while riding on his shoulders, then signed "Funny"—touching its nose—and snorted.) Finally, Halpern continued, "the joke reaches the human neocortex," which, in Close's view, was in charge of manners and customs. "By the time the neocortex gets it, it's hilarious." She shrugged. "Del might have been kidding—he might have just been high."

Halpern handed me one of Close's battered composition books. Inside were diagrams for a new kind of camera lens, a poem-play about Dwight Eisenhower and Ulysses Grant, and, boldly scrawled in green Magic Marker, "A 'Concise' Theory of Improvisational Theory." It was worrisome to see that "theory" was repeated and that "concise" was in quotation marks. Setting out rules for improvisation also seemed somewhat contradictory—one of those self-undermining statements which are a comedy staple (the shouted command to "Relax!" for instance, or Polonius' assertion, in the midst of an endless speech, that "brevity is the soul of wit").

Close began confidently, developing his idea that theatre is play, and that play can therefore rise to the status of theatre:

1. All human interactions—simple or complex—MAY be analyzed in terms of GAMES—(von Neumann, et al.), "A Theory of Games," decision theory, queuing theory, etc. on the mathematical side & Eric Berne & similar work on the psychological side. . . .

4. The further a game is abstracted from behavior, the easier it is to recognize it as a game. (Chess is difficult to confuse with warfare, but Boxing is hard to distinguish from a Brawl.)

But when he shifted to a black marker, and then another, heavier black marker—at about the point that he began trying to explain why, in James Bond films, the games of cards or golf are the best parts—his syllogisms began to wander. They soon stopped altogether. "The above logic is FACILE," Close concluded, trying to write himself out of the muddle, "but not specious."

Other people's comedy theories are



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often inadvertently funny, in the same way that other people's physical pain and embarrassment are funny. Mel Brooks illuminated this problem when he defined tragedy and comedy: "Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if you walk into an open sewer and die." With similarly blithe hostility, standup comedians talk about "cracking up" or "breaking up" the audience with "punch" lines, and equate success onstage with "killing." Monty Python did a sketch once about the world's funniest joke, which is so sidesplitting that it kills all who hear it. In the sketch, the joke is translated and shouted, devastatingly, against the Germans in the Second World War: "Wenn ist das Nunstruck git und Slotermeyer? Ja! . . . Beiherhund das Oder die Flipperwaldt gersput!" That sounds funny, and has the rhythm of a killer joke, but aside from a few actual German words it's nonsense.

Though Del Close never quite worked out all the details, he was convinced that laughter is related to our fear of death. In an e-mail, Mike Myers wrote, "Del Close said that there is very little difference between the realizations 'a-ha we are going to die,' and our laughter, which is 'ha-ha'—he would say that 'ha-ha' and 'a-ha' are related industries." Close's final words were "I'm tired of being the funniest one in the room." He willed his skull to Chicago's Goodman Theatre, where it sits in an acrylic box, intended for use in a future production of "Hamlet."

The University of Hertfordshire is a sprawling brown brick facility in Hatfield, a quiet town half an hour north of London. In the windowless core of the university's Perrott-Warrick Research Unit, which Richard Wiseman runs, is a small computer-server room that contains two loudly humming Macintosh G-4 computers, which, in turn, contain LaughLab. Wiseman has been spending a lot of his time in this room. One afternoon a few months ago, Dr. Jed Everitt, a physicist who wrote LaughLab's software, and who vets jokes for acceptability, brought up the most recently submitted jokes on one G-4, and Wiseman read over his shoulder. "What do you call a blonde with pig-tails? A blow job with handlebars." 'Blonde' is misspelled."

"It's not going on," Everitt said.

"The sad thing is, these people have the vote," Wiseman said.

"What I really like is when they explain the joke at the end," Everitt said.

"And when jokes come in from Sweden and Denmark people often write 'Hee hee hee' afterward. It seems to be a Scandinavian thing." Wiseman scrolled down. "Not on, not on, not on—most of the jokes won't make it. Some unfamiliar American terms get past—Oh, fine, let the beaver joke through—but, as it's for the government's Science Year, we replace 'a Pole' or 'a Belgian' in the ethnic jokes with 'an idiot.' The criticism we hear, and I totally agree, is 'You're taking out the best material!'"

In February, Wiseman was confounded when his site was flooded by more than three thousand different jokes from America, all featuring the same punch line. It turned out that the syndicated columnist Dave Barry had written a column riffing on Wiseman's interim report on his results, which noted, as Barry put it, that "women don't like jokes that involve aggression, sexuality, or offensiveness—also known as 'the three building blocks of humor.'" To improve the over-all joke quality, Barry asked his readers to submit to LaughLab jokes containing the phrase "There's a weasel chomping on my privates"—a line that incorporates aggression, sexuality, and offensiveness, at least to weasels. Because Barry also asked his readers to rate their fellow-readers' weasel jokes highly, one weasel zinger wound up as LaughLab's sixth-funniest entry.

This is just one of the methodological impurities that make Wiseman's study more suggestive than definitive, as he freely acknowledged. "Most science is top down," Wiseman said. "You start with a hypothesis and try to prove it. Laugh-





"She no longer laughs at my joke."

Lab is bottom up: we're driven by what people give us. Masses of people come to the site, bother to type their jokes in, misspell most of the words, fuck up the punch line, and proudly submit it. Let's hear it!"

For a long time, the leading joke was the old groaner about Holmes and Watson going camping. (The punch line is "Watson, you idiot, somebody stole our tent!") "It's a terrible joke," Wiseman said. "When we measure the 'funniest' joke as the one that gets the most 4 and 5 ratings, it's going to be one that most people think is sort of O.K.—and not one that many people find hilarious. So our funniest joke is really going to be the least objectionable funnyish joke."

Another problem, from Wiseman's point of view, is that the country that finds LaughLab's jokes funniest is Germany. "Either Germans do have a very good sense of humor, after all," he said, doubtfully, "or there's not much funny happening in Germany, so any joke at all is seen as absolutely hilarious. Also, if you like LaughLab's jokes, it may not say much for your sense of humor."

It's not surprising that Wiseman's explanations slight the Germans, for humor analysis is as jingoistic as humor

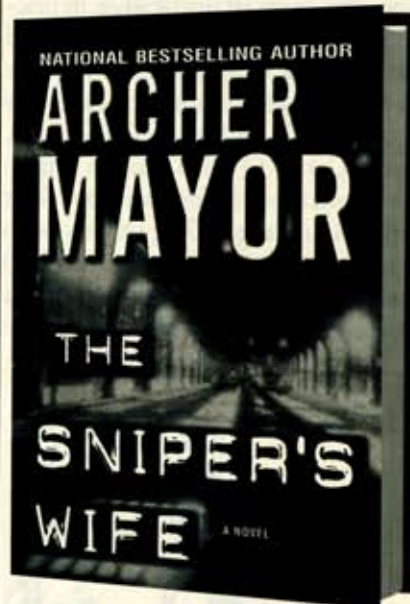
itself. Numerous "social-identity theory" studies have shown that the more jokes esteem a subject's own group and disparage alien groups, the funnier they are. Humor is often a means of saying, "We're civilized and you're not; we're human and you're not." In "An Essay on Comedy," written in 1877, the English novelist George Meredith claimed that refined humor flourishes only in societies with sexual equality, such as—ahem—Victorian England. "Where the veil is over women's faces," he wrote, "you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst. Arabs in this respect are worse than Italians—much worse than Germans."

Wiseman has one top-down hunch he'd like to prove. "We have some questions on the site designed to measure activity in the frontal lobe, the part of the brain involved with flexible thinking," he said. "We ask people to do an estimation task, such as 'Roughly how many words are on a page of a book?' The people who produce wild estimates—thousands of words!—have very bad flexible-thinking skills. One of their favorite jokes is 'What's pink and fluffy? Pink

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fluff.' Whereas those who correctly guess 'under five hundred words' like conceptually difficult jokes. We're hoping the final results will enable us to say something science-y, like 'The frontal lobe explains why Germans like a certain kind of joke, explains the difference between men and women—men are more flexible thinkers—blah blah blah.'

When scientists begin to diagram comedy, most comedians and comedy writers respond by saying, essentially, "Move along. Nothing to see here." Comedy is more art than science, its practitioners believe, and it's an art created not according to algorithms or invariable laws but in flashes of intuition fuelled by potato chips. In the late nineteen-eighties, before Conan O'Brien became a talk-show host, he wrote for "Saturday Night Live." His colleague Greg Daniels (who went on to co-create "King of the Hill") would often scribble pointers from Jim Downey, the show's producer, on scraps

of paper. O'Brien offered an instructive rhyme of his own: "When you overthink, you start to stink."

Yet comedians have very definite ideas about specific techniques and scenarios that "work"—one of them being specificity itself. A joke is funnier if you say "Tropicana" rather than "orange juice." Other rules of thumb are that the punch line or "reveal word" of a joke should come last, and that you weaken a joke if you gussy it up with too much distracting whimsy, an error sometimes referred to as "frosting the flake" or "stacking the wack." So if you take the comedian Emo Philips's joke "I'd like to die in my sleep like my grandfather did, not screaming at the top of my lungs like the passengers in his car," it would be stacking the wack to make the punch line "like the passengers in his rented lime-green Yugo."

One of the oldest comedy dynamics is having a fuddy-duddy driven berserk by an impulsive child (Hera and Zeus; Mr. Mooney and Lucy). Sitcoms are rife with

such formulas. "TVLand to Go," a book by Tim Hill, lists twenty-nine devices, including the slow burn, the spit take, "digging the hole deeper" (a man says his girlfriend's sister is "hot," explains that he meant she looks hot, in the warm weather, and goes on to say, "If she's hot, she shouldn't wear a sweater . . .," and so forth), and the "whee wohn"—the use of editing, sometimes punctuated by a wacky sound effect, to create comic transitions (Man: "You'll never see *me* in a dress!" Smash cut to the man in a gown: "Does this make my ass look fat?")

Certain numbers are held to be wittier or more ludicrous than others: seventeen is generally considered pretty amusing, as are most primes, but the writers for Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" believed that the funniest number was thirty-two. And many offbeat words have a comic valence. Woody Allen has relied on "feathers," "herring," "butter," and "dwarf"; Mel Brooks is fond of "nectarine" and "Saran Wrap." In the book "Comedy Techniques for Writers & Performers," Melvin Helitzer maintains that among the funniest names are Gladys, Chuck, José, Hortense, and Lucky Pierre; that funny occupations include kamikaze, layman, and beggar; and that the funniest word in food is a Twinkie.

In Neil Simon's play "The Sunshine Boys," an old vaudevillian, Willie, says:

"Alka Seltzer is funny. You say 'Alka Seltzer' and you get a laugh. . . . Fifty-seven years I'm in this business, you learn a few things. . . . Words with a 'K' in it are funny. . . . Cupcake is funny. Tomato is *not* funny. . . . Casey Stengel, that's a funny name; Robert Taylor is not funny."

The power of "k" has become comedy lore. The book "Step by Step to Stand-Up Comedy," by Greg Dean, asserts, "Hard consonant sounds, especially *K* sounds, which include hard *C*, *Qu*, and, to a lesser extent, *T*, *P*, hard *G*, *D* and *B*, tend to make words sound funnier." The comic Wendy Liebman told me that she's always trying to write a joke that ends with "kayak." (Many ethnic slurs used in jokes are "k" words: "spic," "mick," "chink," "kike," and "Polack," for instance.)

Neil Simon is distressed that his monologue spawned such a hard-and-fast rule, believing that true comedy emerges from character. "Tricks like that



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are for beginners," he says. "It's like assessing a great football player by the way he laces up his shoes." When I visited Jon Stewart, the host of Comedy Central's "The Daily Show," in his office recently, he echoed Simon's complaint. "There isn't any insider's formula of 'sexual reference plus Jew plus "k-word" equals funny,'" he said.

"And, anyway, didn't Milton Berle die with all the comedy secrets?" Stewart's head writer, Ben Karlin, asked. He was referring to the late comedian's files, which contained more than six million jokes.

"Yes, but he didn't actually know them," Stewart said. "They were in a small metal chest in his cock." It's worth noting that that joke contains a sexual reference (Berle's legendarily large penis), a Jew (Berle), and a "k-word" punch line ("cock").

In 1991, Brent Forrester was working as an extra at Universal Studios, playing such roles as the hobo who is briefly seen warming his hands over a flaming trash can on the show "Quantum Leap." He decided that he would be happier as a highly paid television comedy writer. There was only one problem: he wasn't funny. So Forrester sat in his apartment in South Central Los Angeles and watched endless episodes of "The Simpsons," "Roseanne," and "Major Dad," writing down the routines that worked particularly well and identifying the "humor mechanisms" that underlay them. He determined that there were five. "The first is wordplay," says Forrester, a genial, sandy-haired man who went on to get a job writing for "The Simpsons" and to punch up such movie scripts as "Liar, Liar" and "Office Space." A common type of wordplay is "literalization": a character asks a rhetorical question like "What kind of idiot do you think I am?" and someone pipes up, "A big, fat idiot?"

"Wordplay alone is usually not funny," Forrester says. "It needs to be combined with another mechanism." Wordplay meets certain preconditions of humor: it is surprising, and it hinges on a soluble incongruity. But the problem with puns, riddles, malapropisms, spoonerisms, Wellerisms, and Tom Swifities is that once our brains complete a left-brain homonym match we grasp the trick of the joke. With a more complex joke that

lights up the whole brain, you can't decipher how it works, or why it's funny. A pun is pure technique; to emotionally engage someone in a joke—to get a laugh—you also need a funny theme.

Fortunately, Forrester identified a number of those, too. "The second humor mechanism is comic irony," Forrester said. "For instance, attempting to plug the leak, you make a bigger hole. And it's funnier if you're pleased with your initial effort: 'Aha! I've plugged the leak!' The third is combining the sacred and the profane—the incongruous juxtaposition. A nun sits on the toilet, or a baby has a machine gun. The fourth is a reversal of scale—a little guy in a tiny VW drives into your feet.

"And the fifth," he continued, "is the unintentional revelation of something negative—trying to look classy, Homer lights his cigar with a discount coupon from a car wash. A lame joke has one mechanism: you see an old man with a Mohawk haircut. A brilliant joke always combines three mechanisms." In one "Simpsons" episode, the staff needed a gag for a sequence in which the murderous Sideshow Bob was chasing Bart. Forrester suggested that Bart duck into an office, praying, "Please, God, don't let him find me!" as he hid behind a water cooler, which magnified his head to twice its size. "That's a combination of comic irony and absurd reversal of scale, with the prayer thrown in to add the sacred/profane element," Forrester said. "I knew the joke couldn't fail!" (Somehow, it did: in the show's final version, another gag was used.)

Emboldened, Forrester began to blend temporal and physiological considerations into his Weltanschauung. When he worked on "King of the Hill," in the late nineties, he assembled a three-ring binder labelled "Writing Theory," which now sits on a shelf in the office of the show's co-creator, Greg Daniels. Using the backs



of discarded script pages, Forrester sketched out a "Humor & Duration Principle":

$J/T = F$ [where J is Joke, T is Time, and F is Funny; the less time you take to tell a joke, the funnier it is].

Daniels added "Steam Theory," which was illustrated by two boiling pots. One, uncovered, is releasing small "heh"s. The other, with a lid, gives off a single "HA!" "A lot of shows put jokes in every single line, and that dissipates," Daniels says. "Whereas if you tell only one big joke, and don't try to be funny en route, you can get a big laugh." He insists, "This has a physiological basis!" and adds, in a smaller voice, "Probably."

The show's other writers filled the book with theories of a less serious nature, including:

J/PS varies inversely as BS/J [as Penis Size decreases, joke becomes funnier; as Boob Size increases, the same is true].

If HN, then SV [if hit in the nuts, then squeaky voice].

F Sound = Funny; F Smell = Not Funny [where F is Fart].

Cream π / Face = J^2

Such rules, which seem delightful at 2 A.M. in the writing room, would in most other contexts elicit bewilderment. W. F. Fry, Jr., and Gregory Bateson suggested that jokes work within a "play frame" denoted by a setup or a metacue, which announces, "I am going to relate something funny." Standard metacues include the raised eyebrow, the "Heard the one about?" preamble, and the clipped, article-dropping heightened style of speech ("Man walks into a bar. Bartender says . . ."). If, without a metacue, you told your physician, "If HN, then SV," he'd probably point out that most men who receive a blow to the testicles do not then speak in a high-pitched voice. Jokes also require the right audience. When I mentioned "If HN, then SV" to Jon Stewart, he laughed. Then he said, "But perform it in front of the castrati, and they get *very* angry."

When Richard Wiseman analyzed the LaughLab data, he was dismayed to discover that there was no correlation at all between his respondents' flexible-thinking skills and their



nationalities or genders. His science-y hypothesis that Germans and women like simple jokes because their frontal lobes are relatively puny went nowhere, like a setup without a punch line.

His contest to determine the world's funniest joke was more satisfying. The Holmes-Watson-tent bit was finally overtaken by a joke submitted by a psychiatrist from Manchester, who often tells it to cheer up his patients. Fifty-seven per cent of LaughLab's voters rated it a 4 or a 5:

A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn't seem to be breathing, his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps to the operator, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator, in a calm soothing voice, says, "Just take it easy. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. The guy's voice comes back on the line. He says, "O.K., now what?"

On October 3rd, Wiseman called a press conference in Covent Garden. One of his students, wearing a chicken suit, unveiled a poster with the joke

written on it and stood beside it, making goofy, chickenlike gestures. Afterward, Wiseman told me that he was delighted with the winning entry, as it was so neatly explained by history's three favorite comedy theories. "We feel superior to the stupid hunter," he said. "We appreciate the incongruity of him misunderstanding the operator, and the joke also helps us to laugh about our concerns about our own mortality." The gratuitous inclusion of "New Jersey" was also, clearly, a shrewd play for the American vote, tapping social-identity scorn for the Garden State.

But any analysis of the joke remains unsatisfying. Seeking a thoroughgoing explanation for humor is like seeking the Fountain of Youth, or the Philosopher's Stone—it is a quest not for a tangible goal but for a beguiling idea. That idea, in this case, is to perfectly understand our illogical selves by understanding the most illogical thing that we do. What sometimes makes us giggle at funerals? Theories and brain maps abound, but no one really understands why we laugh when we do. ♦