

THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

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Justine Sless. (2022). *Mistress of Mirth's Comedy Tour*. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.
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In an increasingly digitised world, sometimes it feels like scholars are struggling between the analogue, the digital and “what do we do now?” It is becoming almost necessary to have Twitter, frantically trying to reshare work with an engaging 180 characters in the vain hope someone will read the longer piece attached. There is an increased need to be engaging in the classroom and in our written works, super-mediated in the world of post truth digitality. This pressure in a digital age is a modern form of alienation from the physical work of research as scholars try to keep up (Hassan 2020). In this review, I will refer to both Justine Sless and her work as ‘The Mistress,’ not only because it amuses me, but because it is fitting.

The Mistress avoids structural silos and takes the Master’s by Research in creative writing (La Trobe) combining fictionalised narratives with political and theoretical perspectives about women’s roles and innovations as comedians. It is an example of a hybrid scholarly work bridging the practice and theory of comedy effectively for an attention span challenged digital world.

I have a confession, I rarely read anything that considered creative writing and I thought I would struggle when I started reading “The Mistress of Mirth’s Comedy Tour.” I did not though, because the creative writing stories of a woman’s journey to getting on stage through the perils of open microphone nights in Melbourne, punctuated with the political interludes of scholarly discussion between the stories. For me,

there was more meaning in these stories because I became aware of the theoretical take of the short story I had just read.

When I started to read *The Mistress of Mirth's Comedy Tour*, I found myself falling back to old ideas and bias I had about academic publishing and I had to check myself. Clifford Geertz, one of my anthropological influences, was a returned soldier and part of a change maker in scholarly discourse and the way he wrote was comical and engaging (Ingliss 2012). It is one thing to say the scholarly work has a certain format or tone, but surely, if I might fall back to the works of the Frankfurt school I admired as an undergrad, I should recognise the similar changing times they wrote in, to the post truth digital world now.

It is important to point out that I have a history in applied anthropology in highly political arenas, and I am doing a participatory action research (see Duckles, Moses and Moses 2020) PhD project in political science. I am aware that my opinion will be the stuff of nightmares for empiricist prone scholars. *The Mistress* reminds me of the ethnographic work of Keisalo (2018); discussing women in stand-up as enabling invention and increasing the collection of research that asks for nuanced analyses beyond seeing women in comedy as anomalies but as transgressive innovators. *The Mistress* also highlights, through fictional narratives about “Droll Doll” merchandise, how women in comedy make their bodies the centre of absurdist and transgressive gendered attention as political and comedic resistance (see also Hole 2003).

And while some humour studies continue to analyse the famous, *The Mistress* asserts early that there are few scholars analysing grassroots comedy from the comedian's perspective and performance life cycle (Sless 2022:1). As a scholar doing participatory action research (and comedy), I am an advocate of the practice and lived experience and the work of theoretical specialists being complimentary. In fact, action researchers go as far as to argue they are important to each other's necessary growth in a rapidly changing knowledge production world and not at all oppositional (Duckles et. al 2020). And speaking for myself, being back in the academy feels like a weird reincarnation of Ginger Rogers¹, dancing with a patriarchal system, expected to do more, backwards and in uncomfortable shoes. Whatever we collectively blame or not blame for that, be it the corporatisation of universities or the post truth fast paced digital world, hybrid representations such as Sless's work are needed now more than ever.

The Mistress is the Jewish comedian and the tensions of performing both comedy and theory from this intersection of gender and ethnicity made clear throughout. This is when the work becomes intersectional in examining the social domain of the women of comedy referencing the political, the personal and theoretical interchangeably with the stories of *The Mistresses* comedy tour. Stories from women (fictionalised from interviews) in comedy

¹ Often misquoted as from Ginger Rogers herself but was from cartoonist Bob Thaves: In his 'Frank and Ernest' series, from a Los Angeles newspaper, Frank and Ernest gazing at a billboard announcing a Fred Astaire film festival. The caption reads: **'Sure he was great, but don't forget that Ginger Rogers did everything he did...backwards and in high heels.'** Source: Knowles, E. (2014). Bob Thaves. Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Oxford University Press, p. 315.

punctuated by theoretical discussion in alternating chapters. *The Mistress*, the creative voice in this hybrid work, is both a comedian and a theorist (which is Sless herself in both roles) and the result is a practitioner theorist hybrid representation that will appeal to audiences a traditional thesis will not.

I welcome this kind of scholarly text with its fingers in every proverbial pie (including lived experience) at the intersections of representing a less hierarchical type of knowledge production. I think a certain loss of academic tone to intersectional expertise when expressed in multi-disciplinary, multi-modal ways is, put simply, smart. It is important for the love of knowledge to recognise that the academy needs to keep up, and that does not mean we lose, but we gain room for theory and/or practice and everything in between. As a PhD candidate, who teaches gender politics and public policy as a part time teaching fellow, I am excited by the work of *The Mistress*.

Those of us whose who have never shied away from feminist scholarly work know what backlash looks like to phenomenological or gendered discourses. *The Mistress* addresses that by embracing the spirit of Ginger Rogers and doing it all. This is appealing as I, for one, have taught or consulted to four Australian universities and never stayed for long, preferring the world of community development. There is a mirror here for me in the words of *The Mistress*. For me, *The Mistress* makes it clear that the experience of women on the comedy circuit could have parallels in the academy. I say this because this book is a way the practitioner theorist in humour studies can have intersectional conversations in the academy about what has traditionally excluded women from comedy and from Professorship; traditional notions of gender entrenched institutionally and societally (Crimmins and Casey 2022). I am delighted that my constructivist grounded theory research methodology and approach welcomed by the University of Melbourne that is new from my previous experience. *The Mistress*, with a research approach centring women's role in comedy as not an anomaly, through both comedic and scholarly presentation, is for a practitioner theorist like me, a welcome shift.

Never has there been more need for our scholarly discourse to be innovative and cross-disciplinary than now. Modern scholars must face off with alienation of our work contested by the abundance of conspiracy and that academic knowledge production incorrectly harnessed to justify a plethora of false equivalence. *The Mistress of Mirth's Comedy Tour* is one of those books that can serve at the political and knowledge intersections of multi-disciplinary studies and is a welcome addition to my humour studies academic collection.

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