

# THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

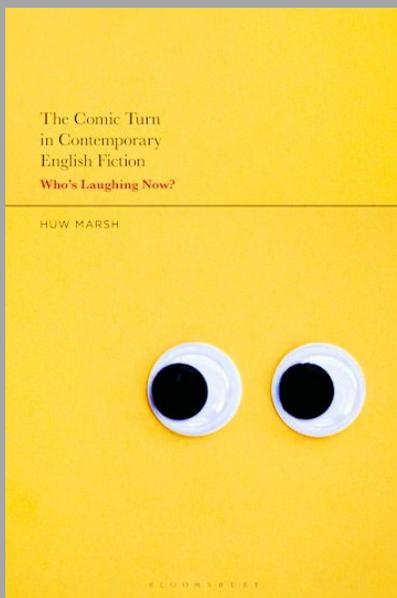
November 2021

Huw Marsh. 2020. *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction: Who's Laughing Now?* London: Bloomsbury. 256pp. ISBN (Hardcover): 9781474293037 ISBN (Paperback): 9781350249387 (eBook): 9781474293044.



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Huw Marsh's *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction: Who's Laughing Now?* is a detailed and compelling showcase for analysing modern literature as comedy (4). Marsh argues that the comic tendencies of contemporary English fiction provide a frame for understanding both the themes a text reflects, and the literary devices used to reflect them. Through analysis of comic structures and comic voices across genre, style, affect and politics in the work of Jonathan Coe, Martin Amis, Zadie Smith, Magnus Mills, Nicola Barker, Howard Jacobson, and Julian Barnes, Marsh demonstrates how the comic perspective can open up new conversations on topics usually treated seriously from class and labour to race and religion. As well as establishing a new approach for literary studies, *The Comic Turn* also provides new considerations for comedy scholarship when examining the tension between comedy's radical and conservative potential.

Marsh doesn't posit a universal theory in *The Comic Turn*. Instead, he adopts a multitude of literary and comic theories – from the likes of Henri Bergson to Georges Bataille to Alenka Zupančič and Umberto Eco – to examine the impact of literary devices like repetition (with Mills), characterisation (with Barker), and narrative voice (with Coe). Each chapter of the book focuses on the impact of the comic tendencies of a particular author on their work. This allows Marsh to explore his broad central contention about the value of analysing comedy's impact on genre, style, affect and politics across a range of fiction. It also makes each chapter a valuable contribution to the subfields of literary scholarship that analyse the works of Coe, Amis, Smith, Mills, Barker, Jacobson, or Barnes, and Marsh is careful to regard each author's

approach to humour and specific textual interests. Marsh is mindful of his multi-disciplinary readership, making *The Comic Turn* accessible to those with backgrounds in humour or literary studies. When Marsh introduces a theorist familiar to one field but not another, he does it quickly and neatly, setting up each idea and incorporating it into the textual analysis. This makes for a book that is eminently readable, with each point clear but not belaboured, the argument as a whole thoughtfully laid out. While, as Marsh acknowledges, it's a fool's errand to attempt to be *funny* in academic considerations of comedy (20), this book shows humour analysis can still be enjoyable.

Marsh is appropriately wary of overly prescriptive definitions – of comedy, of Englishness, of the contemporary – focusing instead on analysing the perspectives created by the situated relationships of these three elements. Comedy is “work intended to amuse” (4), Englishness a context rather than a question of national identity, and the contemporary is a “fluid construct” (13) used to focus on recently published texts as well as how they reflect on the cultural moments they are written into (Marsh says he is considering a post-2000 moment, but one of the novels he analyses is from as early as 1986 and others are published in the 1990s through to the 2010s, reflecting the necessarily vague “rolling contemporary” Marsh describes on page 13). The “comic turn” the book locates is the solidification of a wider history of comedy in fiction in England, and “turn” describes both the action of a move towards the comic in contemporary fiction, a signal of a moment of movement from one approach to another, but also the performance of the comic in these novels.

For readers approaching *The Comic Turn* from a comedy studies perspective, Marsh's literary studies treatment of the question of whether comedy unsettles or reinforces social norms provides a fresh medium to consider this timely issue. For Marsh, comedy can and does do both, and his analysis maps the possibilities and limitations of comedy as social intervention through literature. This is most present in chapters one, three, four and five, wherein Marsh looks at Coe, Smith, Mills and Barker. Focusing on the politics of comedy in chapter one, Marsh shows how Coe's novels are committed to satire, the comic voice and its radical potential while also revealing its limits (50). In Smith's work, Marsh relates the representations of laughter as potentially divisive and potentially unifying to Georges Bataille's argument for laughter as central to community, noting both its power and its fragility (100). These two chapters build on an existing conversation amongst comedy scholars, particularly stand-up scholars, about the potential for comedy to intervene in public discourse on politics, race, religion and community.

Marsh's chapters on Mills and Barker, however, apply the question of comedy's radical or conservative potential to the norms of work and sincerity, areas where this tension has been less critically researched. Marsh argues that Mills' comedies of work critique the contemporary depersonalisation of labour and the elevation of bureaucracy across the working and middle classes through the use of repetition at the sentence, narrative action, plot and the text in *The Restraint of Beasts* (1998) and *The Scheme for Full Employment* (2002). Marsh sees this comic repetition as an entanglement of the automated and the human, in line with Alenka Zupančič rather than what he considers the Bergsonian view of the mechanical and the vital in opposition (129). Repetition, as a source of

comedy and as a literary device, Marsh posits, can expose power structures and prompt scrutiny, revealing absurdities and introducing the disorder such structures are often built to avoid (103). The comic has the effect of shaking, not fully dismantling or reaffirming such structures (129).

Surprising no one familiar with her writing, Marsh's approach to Barker includes an interesting discussion of the grotesque, the carnivalesque and mockery, questioning whether the Bakhtin model truly allows for revolutionary action or if it is merely a release that maintains hegemony. Marsh shows how Barker's fiction has moved beyond this use of the grotesque, charting her use of characterisation and metafictional elements in *Burley Cross Post Box Theft* (2010), *In The Approaches* (2014) and *The Cauliflower* (2016) to move towards fiction that provides a means of simultaneously enacting comic irony and sincerity. This simultaneity, Marsh argues, shows that the two modes are not binary and are often interdependent (161). By examining how these literary devices function in Mills' and Barker's work, Marsh reiterates that comedy can be both corrective and subversive.

One of Marsh's analytical techniques is to account for an author's own reflections of the role and impact of fiction when he performs a close reading of their work. Marsh takes this approach with Amis, Coe and Jacobson, and to a lesser extent Smith and Barker, as each author has grappled with the power and limitations of humour in their public comments on writing. Martin Amis' claims for an ethics of style, for instance, allow Marsh to show that the multiplicity central to Amis' comic voice relies on a juxtaposition between "high" and "low" registers that results in a stylistic judgement of the less educated, lower-class character voices against the educated, upper-class narrative voice (76). This technique successfully allows Marsh to further establish a sense of the diversity of the contemporary through the authors' own voices, and to demarcate the gaps between an author's stated intention and their text itself. In the final chapter of *The Comic Turn*, Marsh returns to the "turn" as a performance. He uses Sianne Ngai's zany aesthetic category, which points to the affective and performative requirements of labour, to analyse the performance of national identity in Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1998). This emphasis on the fiction of Englishness and its commodification is a sharp conclusion to *The Comic Turn*, the parameters of which are the English and the contemporary as published in a post-Brexit context.

Comedy, says Marsh, "is perhaps the mode best placed to explore the paradox, contradiction and messiness of life" (132) given its reliance on and allowance for such juxtaposition. *The Comic Turn* successfully demonstrates the value of examining the comic tendencies of contemporary English fiction and how these tendencies reveal new perspectives on literature and culture. Marsh's position that "the division between comedy and seriousness is a false one" (7) or his argument for the value of considering the comic in literature may not be particularly contentious to readers of this Digest, but *The Comic Turn* does provide a number of innovative ways for literary and humour studies to examine contemporary fiction. This book is designed to be generative, and to show how

the combination of comedy and literature can be generative also. Perhaps it will prompt us to generate similar analyses in the twenty-first-century Australasian context.

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