

Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 404 pp., \$39.95.

If you want to know what's in Davies' *Ethnic Humor Around the World*, you'll need to devote some time and energy to the matter. It's a serious study—not the kind you can read at the bus stop or listen to in bits and pieces on a cassette or read excerpted in a popular magazine. Nevertheless, this is a must-read for anyone who's tempted to make such blanket statements as the one that climaxes a currently popular video tape on cultural diversity: "There is no place in business or academics for ethnic joking."

Davies' purpose is neither to defend or encourage ethnic joking. He's a sociologist turned humor scholar, and he studies ethnic jokes for the same reason that mountain climbers climb mountains: because they're there. He believes that jokes are "a phenomenon in their own right." Rather than being "social thermostats regulating and shaping human behavior . . . they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on."

His goal was to look for "the orderly patterns that underlie this apparently chaotic diversity of ethnic jokes, to uncover the implicit cultural 'rules' that permit the switching of ethnic jokes between some groups but not others, and to suggest social explanations for these patterns and rules." One of the patterns that he discovered is that of extremes, of opposites. The joke-teller occupies "a safe and secure middle ground from which to laugh at those" who have failed to strike "a correct balance between the complementary yet conflicting goals of economic life." For example, the same society that enjoys jokes about stupid, inept, and ignorant people will also make jokes about canny, tricky, and calculatingly stingy people.

Davies discusses nearly forty groups that laugh at the ineptness of their close neighbors. He shows how the growth of jokes about stupidity has correlated with the increasing technical sophistication of industrialized societies. All of us who work in such societies have moments when we fear that we won't be able to keep up; someone smarter may come and take our jobs. That's why it's so comforting to hear jokes that relegate stupidity to the fringes, to someone apart from the society of the joke teller.

Davies says that such a question as "Are [ethnic] jokes a safety valve, or do they push the situation toward an explosive confrontation?" cannot be answered because there are too many variables. Jokes, when looked at in the aggregate, have no author and so there's no way to trace the intent of the creator, and those who tell the jokes may do so for a multitude of purposes, e.g. to make a particular point or to manipulate a social situation. But the most common reason is that of simple "performance, which is an end in itself and the joke is a welcome release from the serious telic world of goals and means."

Davies discusses differences between "chosen" ethnic identities (e.g. Newfoundlanders choosing to be "Newfies" rather than Canadians) and ethnic identities that are defined from outside and forced on people based on such matters as race. "Ethnic identity is often buttressed by religion,"

but Davies does not include jokes that he interprets as purely religious. Likewise he discusses such pattern jokes as those about Aggies, aristocrats, or apparatchiks, only for purposes of comparing them to jokes that he views as unambiguously ethnic.

Besides his chapter on "The Stupid and the Canny," he has chapters on "Who Gets Called Stupid?", "The Stupid and the Dirty," "Who Gets Called Canny?", "How Ethnic Jokes Change," "Militarists and Cowards," "Anglo-Saxon Attitudes," "Food for Thought," (jokes about high-class vs. low-class food), and a "Conclusion." "Sources and Bibliography," in fine print, takes up the final seventy-five pages.

Although it was not Davies' goal, readers who have been insulted or angered by ethnic jokes about their own group may nevertheless come away feeling comforted. It's hard to read hundreds of carefully documented jokes—many of them variations on a theme—without gaining some perspective and realizing that the particular joke that hurt you, or your child's or your friend's feelings, was not created especially for you, or your child or your friend.

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Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, eds. *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*. (New York: Routledge, 1990) 473 pp., \$18.95.

Edited by Ellen C. DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz, two respected historians, *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* is a welcome response to the call for a more complex approach to women's history. Central to this approach are the integration of women of color into women's history and a definition of community that reflects both conflict and concord.

At first sight one is struck with the book's organization—namely, the absence of section headings (such as family, work, or sexuality) to signal a shift in emphasis. This technique, while perhaps unfamiliar to the reader, symbolizes precisely what the multicultural framework of women's history proposes—that the history of women of color be seen as integral to women's history.

Ruiz and DuBois's introduction is an excellent though brief summary of the long-held criticism of women's history, that women of color are generally absent or included only at the margin. The editors review three models of women's history, beginning with the "uniracial" framework that centers on white men. They explain that a "biracial" approach is a vast improvement over the uniracial model because of its ability to examine relations *between* different groups of women and thus to "shatter the notion of a universal female sisterhood." Noting the limits of a biracial framework—namely that it