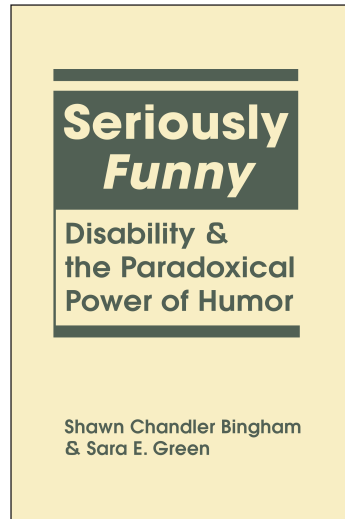


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Seriously Funny:  
Disability and  
the Paradoxical  
Power of Humor

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& Sara E. Green

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# 1

## The Social Significance of Disability Humor

Someday, I'm afraid, the eggheads will take [Red Skelton] up and start reading social significance into his antics. Let's hope they don't, because this has ruined many a good performer.

—Groucho Marx (1959, p. 105)

McCurdy's Comedy Theatre (and Humor Institute) is tucked in the back of a 1970s strip mall in the center of Sarasota, Florida. On a March night, members of a mostly gray-, white-, and blue-haired audience park their Buicks and Cadillacs and line up at the entrance. They are flanked by thirty years of photographs depicting well-known comedians who have played the club. Most who wait in line grew up in an era when institutionalization was the norm for people with lifelong impairments.<sup>1</sup> Yet they wait in line for a performer with cerebral palsy to dole out a heavy dose of cerebral humor.

The weekend headliner is Josh Blue, the 2006 winner of the NBC television show *Last Comic Standing*. His long scraggly beard and disheveled hair give him the look of a Colorado snowboarder or 1970s-era soccer player. He thanks the crowd for staying up past their bedtime, and for the next hour lays out a one-man drive-by examination of parenting with a disability, traveling with the Paralympic soccer team, and the strange reactions he gets doing something as simple as grocery shopping. If Blue tap-dances on the acceptable line of self-deprecation, the jokes often mask a more interesting social critique: "People ask me if I get nervous before coming up onstage. I say, 'Heck no! I've got this many people staring at me all day!'" (Blue 2006b). And just when the audience is fully comfortable laughing at jokes about disability, he yanks the carpet out from under them, reminding them that humor lives in ambiguities, not in a world of black and white: "I would like to inform you that you all are going to hell tonight for laughing

at me. But, it's okay. We'll be hanging out. I hear the Devil's got good weed!" (Blue 2006b).

A (Groucho) Marxist take on this showground might suggest that Blue is simply a comedian doing what comedians do best: amusing people by using personal experiences to make them laugh. However, while entertainment may well be Blue's main goal, the fact that the personal experience on which his performance draws includes cerebral palsy forces his audience to move beyond the comfortable modern practice of politely ignoring impairment. His set is a mirror and a measuring stick, provoking not only laughter but also thought and discomfort. Through his humor, he forces the audience to engage with their own preconceived notions of what disability is and is not. He brings the elephant in the living room that is disability to center stage and makes it impossible for audiences to politely turn away. Far from echoing Groucho Marx's (1959, p. 105) fear that "eggheads will . . . start reading social significance" into the antics of comedians, Blue and other disabled comedians themselves consciously use humor in a socially significant manner (Bartholomy 2012, p. 1). They maneuver in an arena where social critique, education, activism, entertainment, and perhaps exploitation are fused in the act of performance. Where else is disability brought so fearlessly, and aggressively, to the attention of a nondisabled crowd? And where else does the crowd pay \$20 and the price of a two-drink minimum to hear it?

Of course, the social significance of humor is neither new nor unique to disability content. Contrary to the apparent wishes of Groucho Marx, comedy and humor have long provided a lens into social life. In other words, humor has been used as a way to encourage, even force, others to view an aspect of the human experience from a perspective with which they may not be personally familiar or to consider sides of an issue to which they usually stand in opposition. From the searing critiques of William Shakespeare and the political maneuverings of the medieval court jester to the more modern racial comedy of Richard Pryor and political comedy of Jon Stewart, humor has been used as a tool with which to both challenge and redirect power.

A stage like McCurdy's Comedy Theatre serves as a complex social space for modern comedians and audiences. Neither a one-dimensional ring for amusement, nor a simplistic soapbox veiled as comedy, it is an arena in which comedians such as Blue mediate (Mintz 1985) routine and authentic experiences to others in an active, and sometimes activist, manner. Just as stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce used humor to question and problematize US norms of censorship, Blue and other performers with disabilities begin with an understanding of the assumptions about disability with which audience members enter the arena. Then, they actively engage with those assumptions, twisting and challenging them. If they are successful, audi-

ence members leave the performance with understandings of the disability experience that are at least slightly, and perhaps profoundly, altered. In other words, the performance is a mediator through which old assumptions are converted into new understandings. In mediating the disability experience for audiences in this way, the humor of these comedians serves as a deft social indicator by creatively unlocking social norms about disability that might not be adequately unveiled through traditional methods of studying social phenomena. They make the personal very public and in so doing disorder, deconstruct, and reorder conventional views of disability and other broadly held norms about the body. In this way, disabled comedians engage in a kind of “carnival consciousness” in which humor is used to resist and challenge oppressive social arrangements (Bakhtin 1981, p. 49). This kind of humor provides an empowering and accessible opportunity for comedians with disabilities to help create new narratives about the disability experience.

A wide range of comedians with disabilities such as Blue have recently been reclaiming the comedy stage as a political space in which to contest inequality. Disability humor has been called an “emerging, liberatory art form” (Reid, Stoughton, and Smith 2006, p. 640), and the past decade in particular has been its advent season. Media outlets such as NBC, HBO, and BBC have prominently featured comedians with disabilities, as have major venues such as London’s Soho Theatre. As Beth Haller puts it in the introduction to a special issue on disability and humor in *Disability Studies Quarterly*: “Disability humor is out of the closet” (2003, p. 2). Comedic tour groups, including Abnormally Funny People, the Comedians with Disabilities Act, and the Preferred Parking Comedy Tour, have moved beyond college campuses to national tours and comedy clubs. Many of the comedians within those groups also have solo careers. This renaissance is bringing alternative narratives of the disability experience to a wider audience than might have been possible just a decade ago (Bartholomy 2012; Haller 2010; Haller and Becker 2014; Koppers 2011).

The work of disabled comedians highlights the utility of humor as an alternative lens into social life, especially the complexity of disability. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (2005) argue that disabled performers disturb traditional performance aesthetics as well as traditional understandings of disability. The work of disabled comedians also provides a fascinating chance to use disability to explore the paradoxical functions of humor. Humor can heal, yet it can also cut us deeply. It can bring us together and ease tension but, just as quickly, it can highlight difference and reinforce hierarchy. We, the authors of this book, have experienced these various functions in our everyday lives as family members of individuals with disabilities. Shawn Bingham grew up watching his adopted brother with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) deftly maneuver social situations using a lighten-

ing quick wit. He remembers studying the textbook definitions of FAS as a graduate student in the University of Maryland library and wondering how, despite all of the cognitive and emotional limitations that can create obstacles for young people with FAS, his brother had a mastery of humor that was used so strategically: as a form of tension relief, likeability, and networking—ultimately, a unique survival mechanism. Over the course of his lifetime, his brother has drawn on humor as a form of capital that has endeared him to people, creating a kind of safety net that softens some of the negative experiences that come along with FAS.

Nearly thirty years after her daughter Amanda was diagnosed with spastic cerebral palsy, Sara Green can still see two images that flashed through her mind just after receiving the news. One image was based on a painful memory of schoolchildren jokingly calling each other “spastic” to tease, taunt, and bully. This image triggered a sickening anticipation that her daughter would suffer the dual indignity not only of being the direct target of demeaning jokes, but also of having an aspect of her bodily experience used as a generalized derogatory term when nondisabled people tease and taunt each other. Can there be a more powerful insult? How on Earth would her daughter deal with this? How could she possibly protect her daughter from the painful tragedy of this kind of humor? The second image, though, followed rapidly and was much more encouraging. It was the memory of a stand-up routine in which popular comedian and television star Geri Jewell, who shares Amanda’s diagnosis, asks the audience if they know what the worst thing about being a woman with cerebral palsy is? As the audience sits in stunned and embarrassed silence, she tells them that it’s trying to put on mascara—miming the impossible task of attempting to do this with hands that don’t obey the brain’s commands. Every woman in the crowd can empathize with the futile impossibility of this situation, and the room explodes with laughter. Sara remembers with absolute clarity thinking: “Well if that’s really the worst thing, we’ll be able to deal with this. Maybe it isn’t such a tragedy after all.”

In disability studies, a distinction has been made between *disabling humor* that (like the taunts of school children) denigrates people with disabilities by making them targets of derisive jokes, and *disability humor* that (like Jewell’s performance) enlightens others about the disability experience, affirms the humanity of individuals with impairments, counters the widespread view that disability is a tragedy, and challenges stereotypes (R. J. Berger 2013; Reid, Stoughton, and Smith 2006). Disabling humor remains common in popular culture and is reflected in comedy films such as *There’s Something About Mary* (Lebesco 2004; Wolfe 1998) and the stand-up of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. Like other stereotypical media portrayals of disability, these performances reinforce traditional notions of disability (Norden 1994; Haller 2010). Yet we have also seen an increase in

the popularity of humor (whether onstage or in everyday interaction) used as a weapon to contest traditional norms of disability (Davies 2005). Beth Haller and Sue Ralph (2003) suggest, for example, that John Callahan's popular children's cartoon character Pelswick is empowering because he comes across as a smart, cool, funny eighth-grade wheelchair user who gets into hilarious situations with his peers. "The show focuses on Pelswick's interactions with others and the world around him, not his disability" and "normalizes and demystifies the disability experience for his audience" (Haller and Ralph 2003, p. 2). Some comedy seems to function in disabling and empowering ways at the same time—*South Park*, for example (Haller 2003; Reid-Hresko and Reid 2005; J. White 2005).

Kim Reid, Edy Stoughton, and Robin Smith (2006) argue that comedians with impairments may be uniquely positioned to engage audiences in affirming disability humor, which has the potential to change the narrative of the disability experience. Specifically, comedians and other artists with disabilities can use their insider perspective to set the audience at ease while simultaneously unveiling, challenging, and critiquing the widespread belief that having an impairment is inherently tragic (Albrecht 1999; Baum 1998; Haller and Ralph 2003; A. Lewis 1995). Haller suggests that "disability humor appears to be a way in which the disability community is gradually sliding its issues into the mainstream culture" (2003, p. 3). Jewell is often cited as an early example of a comedic performer who helped mainstream audiences relate to the disability experience. As a person with cerebral palsy, she successfully used self-deprecating humor to poke fun at her own experience in ways that were both palatable to audiences and powerful in reframing the disability experience for millions of television viewers (R. J. Berger 2016). Jewell's work is often starkly contrasted with that of Jerry Lewis, who, though not disabled, took on the persona of a person with an impairment in his comedic performance. Though certainly not the only difference between Jerry and Geri, Jewell's position as an insider to the disability experience may play an important role in the acceptance of her work as disability humor rather than disabling humor. Recent research on the acceptability of cartoons with disability content conducted by Morgan Ellithorpe, Sarah Esralew, and R. Lance Holbert (2014) suggests that humor with disability content is more acceptable to audiences when the humorist is known to be a disability insider. The insider status of the humorist is especially important to audience members who have personal or family experience with disability.

Even for humorists with insider disability status, however, the line between disability humor and humor that is disabling is not always easy to draw (Rosenbaum 2003). Disabled comedians who take their humor to the stage can create ironic quandaries for audiences (Shultz and Germeroth 1998). In the era of political correctness, how might they be judged by

other audience members if they laugh at self-deprecating jokes told by disabled comedians? Should disabled people be the only ones allowed to laugh at disability humor? Should audiences laugh if a comedian with one kind of impairment tells jokes about someone with another? Are they laughing because they are embarrassed, or because they see something truly humorous in what is going on?

For many people, the idea of coupling disability with humor is troubling. In a world that equates disability with personal tragedy, the two can seem odd and disturbing bedfellows (Albrecht 1999; Haller 2003). How can there be anything funny about personal tragedy? In describing this book project to others, we have frequently gotten blank stares and awkward reactions. One friend suggested that the project itself might offend other colleagues and asked Shawn: “Shouldn’t you be writing that *after* you get tenure?” But if we heed the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s (1968) poignant argument that there is a connection between joking and social structure and values, it seems important to examine how disability and humor are intertwined. As family members of people with impairments, we know that humor and disability coexist in complex, sometimes painful but also often empowering, ways. It is our goal in this book to explore these complexities—focusing specifically on the perspectives of comedians with disabilities who take the enormous risk of using disability to get a laugh in the context of public stage performance. The role of humor in reinforcing and resisting existing narratives of disability, mediating the disability experience for others, and creating new narratives of disability is the major theme of this book.

## Mapping Disability Through Humor

In the project on which this book is based,<sup>2</sup> we aimed to do what Tanya Titchkovsky (2003) calls “mapping disability” by using humor as a lens into the disability experience. That is, we employ humor as an index and epistemological tool to examine disability in social context. We also reverse the lens, using disability as a way to better understand humor. We began the project with two seminal questions. First, how does humor function as a tool to investigate and analyze the disability experience, and what can be learned from this? Second, how is disability humor used to mediate the disability experience to an audience? To examine the first question, we built on Linda Francis’s (1994) argument that comedy draws on cultural expertise to get people to laugh. That is, we aimed to explore the ways that humor can link to cultural expertise, social analysis, and the disability experience. We take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on humor, disability, and social science theories to analyze how humor can be used as a



sociocritical tool to disorder, question, reorder, and reconstruct traditional narratives of disability. For our second major question, we draw on the work of humor theorists such as Lawrence Mintz (1985) to examine how disability humor is used to mediate the disability experience to an audience, which could be either a group in a comedy club or one individual in an everyday interaction.

We were particularly drawn to the comedic arena as a fascinating space of public sociology in which people of all backgrounds pay money to listen to comedians talk about taboo and controversial issues in an entertaining way. The comedian is uniquely licensed to discuss issues that are unmentionable in other contexts, including disability. If, as has been claimed, the comedian can serve the role of cultural mediator, amateur anthropologist, or public sociologist (Bingham and Hernandez 2009; Douglas 1975; Mintz 1985), we wanted to examine the ways that the performance of disability humor can illuminate or unveil for an audience an entire set of unknown and unexpected layers of the disability experience, including social structures, norms, and values. In addition, disability comedy is not simply about language. Since performers are onstage, they present their message in corporeal form (Kuppers 2003). They also mediate disability through reembodiment. That is, in mediating disability, the comedian goes beyond simply talking about bodily aspects of the disability experience to embodying the experience onstage in real time.

Recent research has examined the content of comedic performances that address disability (Reid, Stoughton, and Smith 2006). Yet despite the rise of disability humor as a form of activism, scholars continue to define disability humor as an undertheorized area (Coogan 2013; Haller 2003; Mallett 2010). If, as Gary Alan Fine and Christine Wood argue, jokes and joking are a “means of recognizing a group’s relationship to civil society” as well as a way to be “cognitively—and potentially politically—relevant” (2010, p. 299), then disability, a category that crosses demographic boundaries, necessitates further inquiry. Following Albert Robillard’s critique of previous analyses of disability humor, our work moves beyond “literary analysis” by drawing on the interviews of “actual lay and professional comedians” who are discussing and describing their own interactions (1999, pp. 61–62). We have added to this line of inquiry by conducting in-depth, semistructured interviews with ten professional comedians with disabilities about the role humor has played in their lives and their work (see the Appendix at the end of the book). In so doing, we hope to bring the voices of these comedians from the stage to the academic discourse on the use of humor as a means of reconstructing narratives of disability. Since much of the social science literature devoted to humor addresses its functions as a tool of coping, acceptance, and social navigation (Moran 2003), we turned our focus to humor as a means of dealing with uncomfortable

interactions, including conflicts and microaggressions. We wanted to examine the ways in which humor might also be used to resist and reframe discomforting social situations, manage identity, and deal with the emotions of others in an active and empowered way. As you will see from the biographical sketches that are included in the Appendix, we interviewed a diverse group of male and female comedians from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These comedians represent a range of disability experiences. Their impairments include: blindness, cerebral palsy, deafness, dwarfism, learning disabilities, mobility impairments, and stuttering. Collectively, they represent a variety of social experiences including: marriage, partnership, and singleness; parenthood; sexual identities; athletic competition; undergraduate and graduate education; and careers on and off the stage. All are currently working as professional comedians who tour—some extensively and internationally.<sup>3</sup>

In the project and these interviews, we took an interpretive approach consistent with principals of one kind of emancipatory research that has gained considerable ground among scholars in disability studies. The strongest version of the emancipatory methodological perspective within disability studies argues that research and activism are two sides of the same coin and that research that does not directly support the cause of revealing and removing social and economic barriers is to be avoided. This version of the emancipatory research perspective is not without its critics, who, among other things, fear that the voices of individuals with impairments whose stories do not conform to the narrative that the disability movement feels it needs to tell to accomplish its goals might be silenced (Shakespeare 2014). Another approach to emancipatory research is grounded in the interpretive tradition and takes the stance that giving voice to the diverse views of marginalized people has emancipatory value in itself. Scholars who use this approach argue that bringing a variety of perspectives on disability and impairment to the attention of professional and academic communities has the potential to increase understanding and facilitate change (R. J. Berger, Feucht, and Flad 2013; Blaikie 1993). We share this view and approached our interviews with comedians from what we call an interpretive-emancipatory perspective.

Our goal in this project was to bring the perspectives of comedians with disabilities to the attention of academic audiences—in and outside of disability studies. We wanted to offer the comedians an opportunity to tell the stories they want us to hear about their disability experiences and the impact of both disabling and disability humor in their lives. We particularly wanted to explore the ways in which they negotiate the interesting and risky social space that lies at the intersection of disability and professional comedic performance. We were also interested in their views on how the performance of disability on the comedic stage might support or diverge

from the goals of the disability movement. While these goals and our methods are consistent with those of an interpretative-emancipatory perspective, there is an interesting twist in this project. The goal of interpretative methodology is often to give voice to perspectives that are silenced because they come from people who occupy marginalized positions in society (Blaikie 1993). As people with impairments who are disabled by negative social attitudes, physical and economic barriers, and hegemonic cultural notions of what it means to live a normal life (ableism), these comedians clearly occupy marginalized positions. As public performers, however, they actively resist being silenced. It is likely, in fact, that collectively their work has more far-reaching impact on general populations than does academic scholarship on disability. They may have wider impact than more serious-minded disability activists. As a consequence, our goal was not to give voice to these comedians. They have voices (and microphones) and are unafraid to use them. Our goal was, rather, to bring to the attention of the academic community their perspectives on the experience of being public performers with disabilities and their views on the ways in which their work intersects with, challenges, or supports the work of disability activists and scholars. In this way, we seek to engage as researchers “with those seeking to emancipate themselves” (Oliver 1997, p. 25) by “breaking down stereotypes of people with disabilities one laugh at a time” (as quoted at [joshblue.com](http://joshblue.com) 2014).

## **Organization of the Book**

Since this book is part of the Lynne Rienner Disability Series, it is likely that readers will come to it with a far greater understanding of the complexities of disability than of humor. So, in the next chapter, we spend some time examining scholarship on the many interdisciplinary functions of humor. These functions and their related concepts provide important scaffolding for the analysis in subsequent chapters. While the experiences of the ten comedians we interviewed (Josh Blue, Liz Carr, Steve Danner, Tanyalee Davis, Nina G., Terry Galloway, Kim Kilpatrick, Simon Minty, Alan Shain, and Maysoon Zayid) form the core of this book, we also wanted to place their work in the context of the historical linkages between disability and humor. In Chapter 3, we explore the ways in which disability and humor have been linked across time, beginning with the Greco-Roman era and moving through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Enlightenment, vaudeville, and the rise of stand-up comedy. We pay particular attention to how the relationship between humor and disability shifted as the dominant narrative of disability changed from one of moral weakness to one of illness and personal tragedy as well as how humor can be used as an index of

larger attitudes about disability. In Chapter 4, we bring these historical linkages to the present by exploring the intersection of disability and humor in the everyday lives, work, and professional aims of the comedians we interviewed.

We had other objectives beyond the broader themes of humor as a means of analyzing and mediating the disability experience. We also wanted to create interdisciplinary links, bridging some of the work that has been done on parallel tracks in disability studies, humor studies, and the social sciences. Scholars in sociology, cultural studies, and philosophy have developed theories on humor, but few have included disability in their analyses. Even less frequently have scholars attempted to synthesize comedic theory with social science and disability studies approaches toward disability into an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the complex relationship between disability and humor. In Chapter 5, we examine ways in which models of disability and theories of humor can be linked and provide examples of these linkages from the work of the comedians we interviewed.

Finally, we wanted to use disability as a way to better understand humor—especially the tension that exists between humor and notions of political correctness. The disability rights movement has made progress in terms of how the public speaks and thinks about disability. While all of the comedians we interviewed classify themselves as part of that movement, they often walk a fine line between exploiting and challenging notions of disability for a laugh. In Chapter 6, we examine these paradoxes and the ways in which comedians negotiate this sticky territory in their everyday lives and in the context of their stage performances. In the final chapter, we pull together what we have learned about the complex relationship between disability and humor and make suggestions for future research. We have aimed for a type of emancipatory research that brings to the scholarly discourse comedic insight into such issues as living with disability, performing disability humor in an era of political correctness, and the responsibility of representation. The experiences of the professional performers who graciously shared their stories with us can help shed important light on the broader and evolving definitions of humor and disability.

## Notes

1. We differentiate between the concepts *impairment* and *disability*. Following the social model of disability, we associate *impairment* with bodily differences currently conceived to be outside of the range of “normal” variation—recognizing that normal is also a social construct that varies with social, cultural, and historical context. *Disability*, however, is conceived as a more complex phenomenon that stands at the intersection of bodily difference and the social, cultural, and physical environ-

ments that impose layers of disadvantage on people whose bodies do not fit neatly within current concepts of normality. We find value in both the UK convention of speaking of *disabled people* to emphasize the degree to which environments act on people with impairments to disable them and the US convention of using *people with disabilities* to put the person first and emphasize the fact that disability is only one piece of an individual's identity. We therefore use these terms interchangeably in the text. In quotations from interviews and other sources, we use terms as they are included in the source verbatim.

2. Previous versions of portions of this book were published in *Humanity and Society*, OnlineFirst, December 17, 2015; and Green and Bingham, forthcoming.

3. Our interviews were between one and a half and three hours in length, and they were conducted in a format and location chosen by the participants. Interviews were semi-structured. We used an interview guide to make sure that all participants were given a chance to cover the same ground, but participants were given wide latitude to shape the course and content of the interview. These interviews were part of a larger project that was reviewed for compliance with ethical standards for research with human subjects and approved by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board. During the consent process, participants were asked whether they would prefer to remain anonymous or to be identified in publications resulting from their interviews. All chose to be identified in our work by the names that they use onstage.