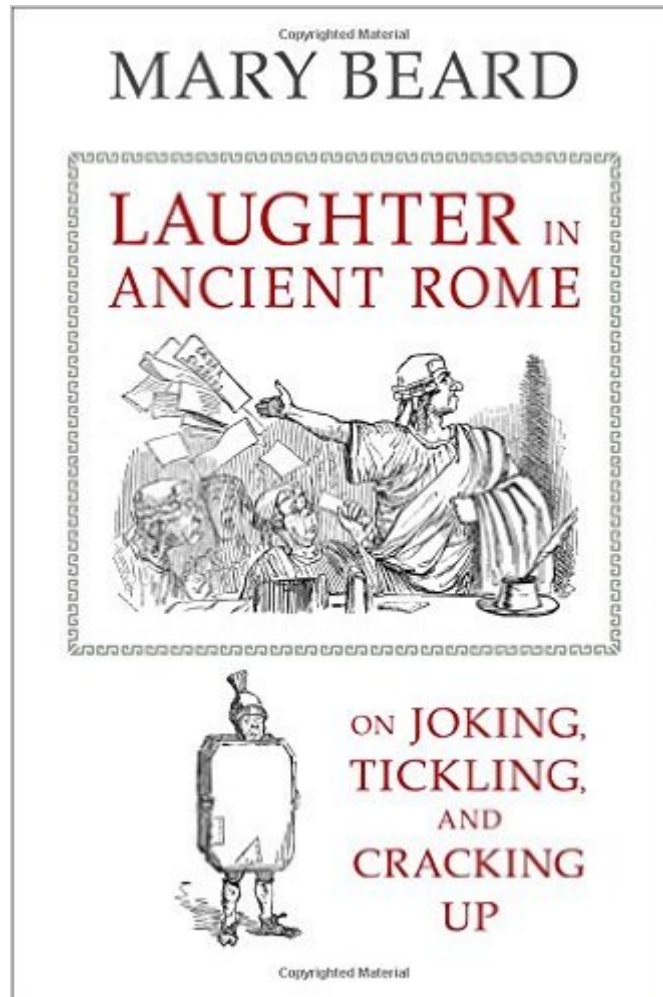


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Laughter In Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, And Cracking Up (Sather Classical Lectures)



Synopsis

What made the Romans laugh? Was ancient Rome a carnival, filled with practical jokes and hearty chuckles? Or was it a carefully regulated culture in which the uncontrollable excess of laughter was a force to fear—a world of wit, irony, and knowing smiles? How did Romans make sense of laughter? What role did it play in the world of the law courts, the imperial palace, or the spectacles of the arena? *Laughter in Ancient Rome* explores one of the most intriguing, but also trickiest, of historical subjects. Drawing on a wide range of Roman writing—from essays on rhetoric to a surviving Roman joke book—Mary Beard tracks down the giggles, smirks, and guffaws of the ancient Romans themselves. From ancient “monkey business” to the role of a chuckle in a culture of tyranny, she explores Roman humor from the hilarious, to the momentous, to the surprising. But she also reflects on even bigger historical questions. What kind of history of laughter can we possibly tell? Can we ever really “get” the Romans’ jokes?

Book Information

Series: Sather Classical Lectures (Book 71)

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: University of California Press (June 25, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520277163

ISBN-13: 978-0520277168

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.2 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars — See all reviews (14 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #613,391 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #65 in Books > Humor &

Entertainment > Humor > Theories of Humor #66 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History &

Criticism > Genres & Styles > Humor #809 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism >

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Customer Reviews

Here’s one that had them laughing in the olden times. “Doctor,” says the patient, “whenever I get up from my sleep, for half an hour, I feel dizzy, and then I’m all right.” And the doctor says, “Get up half an hour later.” This joke worked in ancient Rome 2000 years ago; I hadn’t heard it before, but it reminds me of, “Doctor, it hurts when I do _this_,” and the doctor says, “Then don’t do that.” I bet that second one would have had them rolling in the

aisles at the Colosseum, too. But most of the stuff of laughter in *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (University of California Press) I didn't find funny, and Mary Beard has good explanations for why what amused the Romans often fails to amuse us. So her book isn't particularly funny, and that's not surprising; Beard is able to write with wit and good humor, but she is a serious classicist with scads of books and papers to her name. Even with all her erudition, she has to remind us repeatedly that there is much that we do not understand about Roman society, language, and humor. You can read hundreds of books on Roman emperors and conquests; this represents a valiant attempt to bring a little understanding of a smaller, but no less important, part of what made Rome run. Roman writers reflected Aristotelian thought about laughter, and Cicero had ideas about humor that showed the sort of split view Romans had of it. Cicero taught that there was little worse than an orator going for a laugh just for the sake of it. The Romans seem to have had a great deal of worry that the one who makes the joke could also be thought the butt of it. The subjects of jokes that made the Romans laugh will often strike us as strange.

In the fall of 2008, noted classicist Mary Beard gave the Sather (Classical) Lectures at Berkeley. Those lectures, and five years subsequent thinking over what she said there led to this book, and a fine piece of scholarship it is. Starting from the question, what made Romans laugh, she discusses a range of topics: what is laughter for? And what is humor — joking among its most prominent forms — for? Especially what role did joking play in status and power obsessed classical Rome? How transgressive and aggressive was Roman humor and laughter at different times during the imperiate? How much did Roman views on the role of laughter and of humor descend from Greek views and where was it different? In the brilliant penultimate chapter she meditates on an ancient compendium of jokes, the *Philogelos* (it contains a *œsome* 265 jokes •), and asks: did Rome invent the idea of the joke as an exchangeable commodity? (Almost every other aspect of Roman life was commodified.) Her observations on all these topics are carefully considered, weighed with ambiguity at times as is fitting on the study of texts so distant in time and mores from ours, and corrupted, even lost, in their transmission from scribe to scribe. Indeed, one of the most fascinating lessons of this rich study is how complicated it is to tease meaning from ancient artifacts and thus how provisional any conclusions reached from study must be. There are widely variant texts, missing parts, in some cases only fragments left or even less, just descriptions of the texts in other writers' equally fragmentary works. Scribes have made grievous mistakes in transcribing, to the point that whole passages no longer make sense. Words are so badly written down as to be

indecipherable.

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