

Book review

Davis, Susan G. (2019) *Dirty Jokes and Bawdy Songs: The Uncensored Life of Gershon Legman*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Dirty Jokes and Bawdy Songs: The Uncensored Life of Gershon Legman by Susan G. Davis is a masterful study of one of the twentieth century's great contrarians and unsung heroes of the era's sexual revolution. A protean and boundary-pushing radical thinker and pioneering folklorist, Legman belongs to those self-taught, institutionally unattached researchers and independent scholars who neither manage to build a large following during their lifetime nor are sufficiently practical to secure a lasting legacy after they are gone. Thinkers of Legman's temper – independent, eclectic, contrarian, heretical – tend to burn out like comets after their productive lives are over. So, it takes the recovery work of committed scholars and passionate advocates to keep the memory alive and to insist on the meaning and relevance of the work that these iconoclasts have accomplished. This kind of work can be a thankless task and something that junior faculty and early-career academics would be cautioned to steer away from, as it tends to be poorly paid by the coin of the academic realm. But Susan G. Davis, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has taken up the challenge with great gusto, skilfully preserving and valuing the work of this fascinating misfit. In terms of genre, the book is essentially a critical biography of the man and his work, but, under Davis's skilled and wide-ranging treatment, it becomes a compelling exercise of life writing, a history of sexological research, an introduction to the study of folklore, and a treatise on joke analysis.

Knowing that her readers are unlikely to have ever heard of Legman, Davis loses no time to establish the relevance of her subject: "His writings were a bridge between nineteenth- and twentieth-century radicalisms" (p. 5), we learn; moreover, "his cantankerous early voice made arguments that have seeped into our broader culture" (p. 3) because "in his audience were the forerunners of the 1960s counterculture" (p. 1). But, as readers are quickly becoming aware, we are not only reading the book for the sake of preserving the pioneering cultural and scholarly contributions Legman allegedly made to our culture and society. Indeed, the stories spinning out from Gershon's career as a compulsive collector of erotica and a tireless compiler of oral jokelore are delightful for their own sake – how he befriended Henry Miller and schemed to bring out an illegal edition of *Tropic of Cancer* in the US, how he seduced Anaïs Nin while dabbling in pornography writing, how he narrowly escaped arrest and imprisonment under the US obscenity laws in 1950 (his associate was imprisoned for years under the Comstock laws), and how he fell out with Alfred Kinsey after initially collaborating with him on *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*... these and many more tales make for a compelling read.

Davis makes no bones about the obsession with sex that seems to have dominated Legman's life: "He didn't want to do anything except read and write about sex" (p. 47). Fortunately, Davis does not attempt to nail down a neat explanation for this monomaniacal pursuit, for this – as well as many other matters of personal psychology – are too complex to fit into simple explanatory schemes of (Freudian) causality. Legman was convinced that sexual repression both feeds on patriarchal power structures and stifles male and female self-expression, fulfilment, and a healthy emotional development. He saw in the sex repression the original sin of western

man. But as much as Legman was a visionary in removing the odium of scandal from discourses surrounding sex and erotic attraction, he was at the same time a cultural conservative who trotted out stereotypes about women as born homemakers and who made no effort to hide his homophobic sentiments.

There are so many “althoughs” in this man’s life and work. For instance, although he contributed to the emergent field of humour studies by legitimising jokes as a subject of serious scholarly inquiry, he was, at the same time, a fairly poor analyst of his vast corpus of jokes, measured by standards of abstract theory. He was primarily a bibliographer, historian, and describer of jokes, but he lacked the academic and methodological wherewithal to formulate analytical humour theories such as advanced by other scholars, like the “semantic script theory” (Raskin 1985) or the “appropriate incongruity” theory (Oring 2016). His thinking was stuck in the rut of Freudian ways of interpreting jokes as disguised forms of aggression and as relief from sexual anxiety. In this way, Legman demonstrates the shortcomings of a New Critical mentality that pontificates about the meaning of text by positing “the reader” or “the joke teller” which in essence means “the author himself”. Modern social science approaches use a much more fine-grained, empirical matrix when it comes to analysing the effect of jokes on diverse audiences, and Legman was nowhere involved with the quantitative analyses of humorous expressions and kept applying an interpretive frame that largely hitched the horse before the cart, using his material to demonstrate pre-conceived conclusions about the function and origin of sexual humour “as expressions of psychosexual hostility” (p. 216). While some jokes doubtlessly match this description, many more are grounded in other dynamics, like play, incongruity, subversion, experiment, or conformity.

There are two reasons why Legman remained ultimately quite irrelevant in the very field – oral sexual jokelore – that he had helped to found. He was a self-taught intellectual who lacked formal training in any specific discipline, and he was essentially an exile during the majority of his working life. In 1950, Legman was cited before a panel of authorities in Washington D.C., adjudicating whether he had violated the Comstock laws for mailing “obscene” materials. Rather than face imprisonment, Legman emigrated to France. And, as a poor scholar, barely making a living on the basis of his sparse royalties, he moved to a rural part in the South of France, settling in Valbonne where life was cheap. There he pretty much spent the rest of his life, somewhat isolated from the intellectual climate of the American (or indeed any) academy. Such isolation was conducive to Legman’s enormous productivity, as he churned out book after book, folkloric collection after folkloric collection, but it also fostered an insular approach that was idiosyncratic and quaintly Freudian.

This book is both a highly entertaining biography of a colourful iconoclast and the tragic story of a scholar *manqué*. For the lover of humour studies and the aficionado of folklore studies, there is much to keep the reader engaged. Susan Davies tells Legman’s extraordinary story with great brio, sympathy, and critical distance. Although I have never heard of Gershon Legman before, I was pleased to read this brilliant effort in intellectual recovery work from cover to cover.

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References

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