

## Book review

**Eagleton, Terry (2019) *Humour*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.**

Eagleton's book is another interesting addition to the introductory books on humour research. It is an exceptional mix of diverse theoretical perspectives and a critical appraisal of existing works on humour and jokes. In its preface and five chapters, Eagleton gives readers a summary of the main lines of thought on the concept of humour while drawing his examples primarily from the English tradition.

Eagleton's focus in the first chapter is laughter. He lists the numerous common adjectives for modifying the act and art of laughter in English. These modifiers, which he terms *idioms for laughter*, point out the inherent paradox in how the action of laughing is operationalised in the English culture. They are subtle pointers to English cultural ideologies and politics of laughing at and laughing with someone. The central idea here is that laughter is a signifier without an intrinsic denotative sense, but is enmeshed with connotative social meanings that could be uncovered from the biological, sociocultural and cognitive perspectives. Because of the focus on laughter, one is tempted to think that Eagleton's monograph is on laughter and not humour, which is the title of the book. However, he is quick to remind the readers that laughter could be directly linked to humour, but is not essentially determined by it. From these early pages of the book, the readers are drawn to the fact that laughter is not symmetrical with humour.

The next two chapters of the book explore the meta-theories of humour, primarily the superiority and incongruity approaches. The chapters also touch on the release theory. Of course, there are numerous books introducing these basic theories in humour research; however, the advantage of Eagleton's book is that it is a master tapestry of numerous perspectives within these approaches. It is certain that readers would meet several thinkers and writers whose perspectives contributed to the development of the philosophy and sociology of humour. Eagleton takes us on a ride to explore what has been said about humour by ancient philosophers as well as contemporary researchers. While illuminating examples are used to illustrate these meta-theories, he also points out their strengths and weaknesses. He quotes British writers extensively and uses convincing examples from the English literary tradition. It seems Eagleton wants readers to understand humour from the English culture perspective.

In chapter four, Eagleton takes readers back in history through an exposition on how humour has been perceived from the time of ancient philosophers to the nineteenth century. However, in the fifth chapter, which is the last, he emphasises the socio-politics of humour. The significant dimension that Eagleton wants his readers to see is the paradigm shifts on humour as the world moved away from Puritanism, and began to use factors such as sociability and commercial value for defining social order. Humour and sharing a joke are presented as being no longer prohibited within the upper echelon of society, but have become cardinal ingredients of a prosperous society and amiable qualities of a social personality.

Although Eagleton's *Humour* makes a good read, it is not without its shortcomings. The author's exclusive use of examples of jokes and typologies of humour from British scholarship might not necessarily stimulate readers who are not familiar with British writings. On the flip

side, these illustrations could further excite readers towards a more precise subject, English (literary) humour, of which Terry Eagleton is a leading specialist. The conceptual delineation of jokes from witticisms, in the final chapter, might help beginners distinguish the two. However, the differences he foregrounds still constitute a utopian ideal as one is left wondering whether, in conceptualising the two, he is interested in aesthetics and stylistic use of the comic or in the social dimensions in wording wit and jokes into communication. Eagleton foregrounds the political dimension of humour and the double-edged effect of its laughter, which lies in its ability to transform society and vilify its targets. It is not surprising that his last chapter is on the political use of humour since a recurring theme in the book is the symbolic function inherent in sharing a joke and expressing humour.

Eagleton's *Humour* deserves credit for its very critical but entertaining approach to philosophical and literary works on humour. His remarkable use of examples from the British tradition affirms Eagleton's authority in the British literary canon. He should be commended for providing readers with an academic linkage to what English writers have said about laughter, jokes, wit and humour in the past. His arguments also provide readers with an analytically innovative dimension to the use of humour in our contemporary world. I therefore strongly recommend the book to all individuals who are interested in analysing jokes and all forms of humour.

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