



Humorists: From Hogarth to Noel Coward

By Paul Johnson

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“It is Johnson’s gift that he can make his subjects human and fallible enough that we would...recognize them instantly, while also illuminating what made them heroes.” —*Washington Post Book World on Heroes*

“Johnson is a clear, intelligent, forceful writer, and nothing if not thorough.”
—*Wall Street Journal*

Paul Johnson, the acclaimed author of *Creators, Heroes*, and the *New York Times* bestseller *Intellectuals*, returns with a captivating collection of biographical portraits of the Western world’s greatest wits and humorists. With chapters dedicated to history’s sharpest tongues and most piercing pens, including Benjamin Franklin, Toulouse-Lautrec, G.K. Chesterton, Damon Runyan, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, and many more, Johnson’s *Humorists* is an exciting compendium of our most enduring comical and satirical innovators.



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Humorists: From Hogarth to Noel Coward By Paul Johnson Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1883079 in Books
- Published on: 2011-11-29
- Released on: 2011-11-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .61" w x 5.31" l, .39 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 272 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

British historian Johnson (Churchill) misses the mark with this odd collection of biographical snapshots of "humorists"--the term is debatable--throughout Western history. Noting that laughter was first recorded in words in chapter 18 of the book of Genesis, Johnson divides humorists into two categories: those who create chaos for laughs and those who analyze the inherent oddness of individual personalities to find comedy. But instead of using this basic rubric--and all points of intersection--to explore the evolution of humor from the 18th century to our current one, Johnson's portraits of these so-called humorous men (Nancy Mitford is the only woman, and she shares a chapter with Noël Coward) lose any sense of a central thesis. Particularly in the cases of painters Hogarth, Thomas Rowlandson, and Toulouse-Lautrec, Johnson's intense focus on minute details of works not reproduced in the text make his analysis difficult to grasp for readers unfamiliar with the artists' work. Chapters devoted to Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, and James Thurber are among the best, and in them Johnson is able to stifle his urge to overanalyze the biographical elements and let the subjects--and their amazing comedic work--speak for themselves. (Dec.) (c)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Historian Johnson takes a serious and thoughtful look at humor, noting that laughter, when you analyze it, is no joke. He launches into an analysis of the pioneers of stand-up comedy, running gags, and one-liners from expected and unexpected sources: Shakespeare to Hogarth, Benjamin Franklin to Laurel and Hardy. He sees the genesis of comedy in either the creation of chaos (W. C. Fields, Groucho Marx, Evelyn Waugh, and James Thurber) or observations of human weirdness (Toulouse-Lautrec, George Bernard Shaw, and Damon Runyon). Chapters offer engaging sketches of the humorists and the life circumstances (some pretty dreadful) and personality quirks that drove their comic or tragicomic outlooks and works. G. K. Chesterton found great humor in the strivings of the Christian faith—and reason—to corral the human spirit, Charlie Chaplin meticulously plotted out his chaotic comic routines, and Charles Dickens reveled in verbal running gags. Other subjects of the droll, revealing profiles are Dr. Johnson, Thomas Rowlandson, Noël Coward, and Nancy Mitford. Johnson masterfully weaves a narrative line among the figures, many of whom don't spring to mind as comic, with a deep appreciation for their wit in writing, filmmaking, painting, and living. --Vanessa Bush

Review

"Warmly appealing This book's long view, and its deep eccentricities, are what give it a burnished glow It's a pleasure to sit around the gently crackling fire that is Mr. Johnson's mind." (*New York Times*)

"Johnson assembles a truly enlightening and readable history of humor." (*Washington Post*)

"A rich set of essays Johnson casts a wide net and he hauls in good material Fine anecdotes, examples, and insights Handsomely written." (*The Economist*)

"Johnson masterfully weaves a narrative line among the figures, many of whom don't spring to mind as comic, with a deep appreciation for their wit in writing, filmmaking, painting, and living." (*Booklist* (starred review))

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Ann Craft:

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