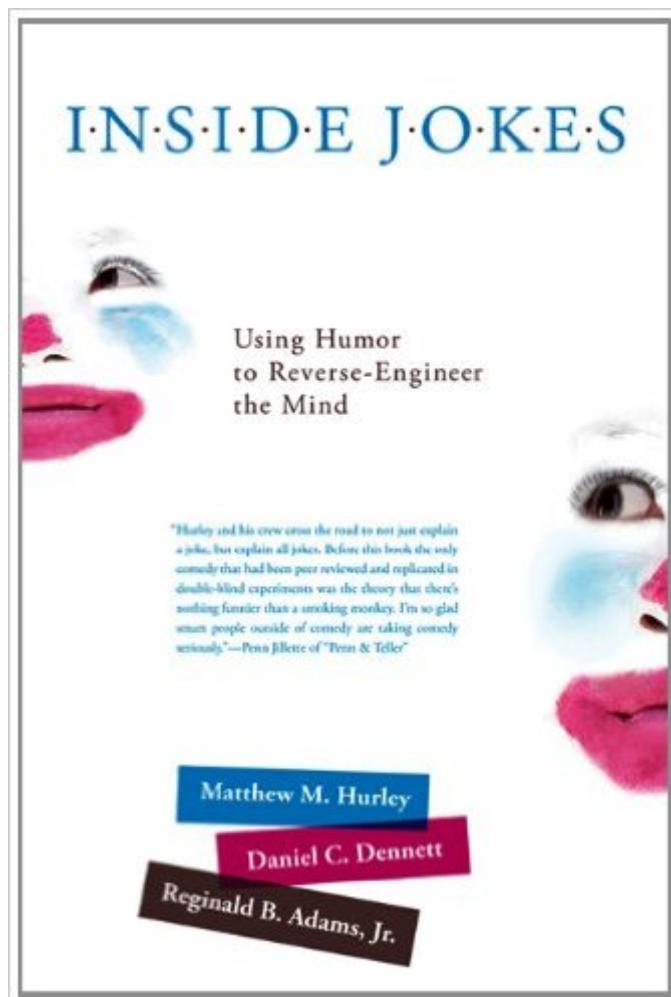


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# Inside Jokes: Using Humor To Reverse-Engineer The Mind (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Some things are funny -- jokes, puns, sitcoms, Charlie Chaplin, The Far Side, Malvolio with his yellow garters crossed -- but why? Why does humor exist in the first place? Why do we spend so much of our time passing on amusing anecdotes, making wisecracks, watching The Simpsons? In Inside Jokes, Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams offer an evolutionary and cognitive perspective. Humor, they propose, evolved out of a computational problem that arose when our long-ago ancestors were furnished with open-ended thinking. Mother Nature -- aka natural selection -- cannot just order the brain to find and fix all our time-pressured misleaps and near-misses. She has to bribe the brain with pleasure. So we find them funny. This wired-in source of pleasure has been tickled relentlessly by humorists over the centuries, and we have become addicted to the endogenous mind candy that is humor.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Anywhere in the world, if you are in a group of people chatting, you will find yourself or find someone else talking in a way to attempt to produce laughter in those listening. It seems to be hardwired behavior for us, because it happens in every society we know. Not only do amateur humorists aim to bring laughter to others, professionals can get paid to do so, and the payment comes from people who buy tickets because they so value the laughter experience. Why do we laugh, and why is it so important for us to do so? There have been lots of explanations for this

interesting, enjoyable, and universal behavior over the millennia (of course Aristotle had a crack at it), and they are all reviewed in *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (The MIT Press) which grew out of a dissertation by Matthew M. Hurley, who is joined here by co-authors Daniel C. Dennett and Reginald B. Adams. The authors propose their new theory of humor, which encompasses what they say are the partial explanations that have gone before. It is a persuasive theory, and the book is successful for a number of reasons. It quite properly examines the evolutionary role of laughter; anything that universal must be promoting our fitness somehow. It is a serious work; the authors invite researchers to take it seriously and to start up the brain scans and other research to confirm or expand their theory. And though it is serious, and the writing is academic and not jocular, the topic is fun. The authors obviously enjoy jokes and enjoy them better for getting some understanding of how they operate. They quote E. B. White, who made a joke about examining jokes too closely: "Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.

In the middle of 2011 a new theory of humor popped onto the science blogs - this was Peter McGraw's Benign Violation Theory of Humor. I mention it because it provides a helpful contrast to the subject of Inside Jokes. I was pretty interested in the Benign Violation Theory when I heard about it, and upon further investigation, it sounded pretty reasonable to me. Later hearing that the brilliant Daniel Dennett had endorsed a new and different theory of humor, I had to check it out. This theory of humor and its entire presentation redefined for me the standard of what a theory of humor needs to be. Reading Inside Humor, I could see that the BVT was pretty weak in many areas. It may be true enough that it describes \*what\* humor is (see McGraw's TED talk called "What Makes Things Funny") however, it didn't seem to say anything about \*why\*. This omission only became obvious when Inside Jokes argued that "why" was really the interesting question and that they had answered it. I also think that the Benign Violation Theory has a danger of being somewhat circular - humor results from a "violation" but could a violation be defined as something that, when benign, was funny? Again, I mention this competing theory to demonstrate how much more comprehensive the theory of Inside Jokes is. It is a functional theory that would inform someone who wanted to design a synthetic brain capable of humor. I felt this theory's attention to the big picture was far more complete than any other theory I'd heard. It made me feel like other theories of humor were merely "observations" of humor. In classic philosopher style, Daniel Dennett keeps the theory on track by very explicitly avoiding circular thinking, incomplete theories, and other easy-to-make thought errors (which he enumerates).

This book is an attempt to figure out why we like jokes: why do we perceive things as funny and what evolutionary function does humor have? How did we develop funnybones and what for? The primary, or first, author is Hurley, who wrote it as his doctoral thesis at Tufts under the tutelage of Dennett, a distinguished philosopher of such matters, and Adams, a professor of psychology at Penn State. It's a worthwhile book, and in passages even lively, but it bears the mark of a revised dissertation, primarily in its exhaustiveness and in a certain scholarly tone. Numerous jokes are interspersed throughout the book. Some are good, some less good and a few horrible. Most are new but some are as old as the hills. For the most part, they serve an explanatory purpose. Some are apt, particularly this one, which is at the heading of the final chapter: There are two kinds of people in this world: Those who require closure. That joke works so well not only because it's funny but because it highlights how our brains work in the presence of incomplete information. We are Closure Machines. We leap to complete things even in the presence of unfinished data. And that's the background for Hurley et al.'s theory of how humor works in the brain and why a sense of humor is there. Humor is, to borrow Stephen Jay Gould's term, a spandrel: a device thrown up during our long evolution to humankind to serve another purpose and now left over to function on its own. In this case, the original purpose was to provide reward to us as we sifted through belief commitments we had previously made to see if they held up in the light of subsequent knowledge. It's a reward for a time-consuming and sometimes difficult cognitive behavior.

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