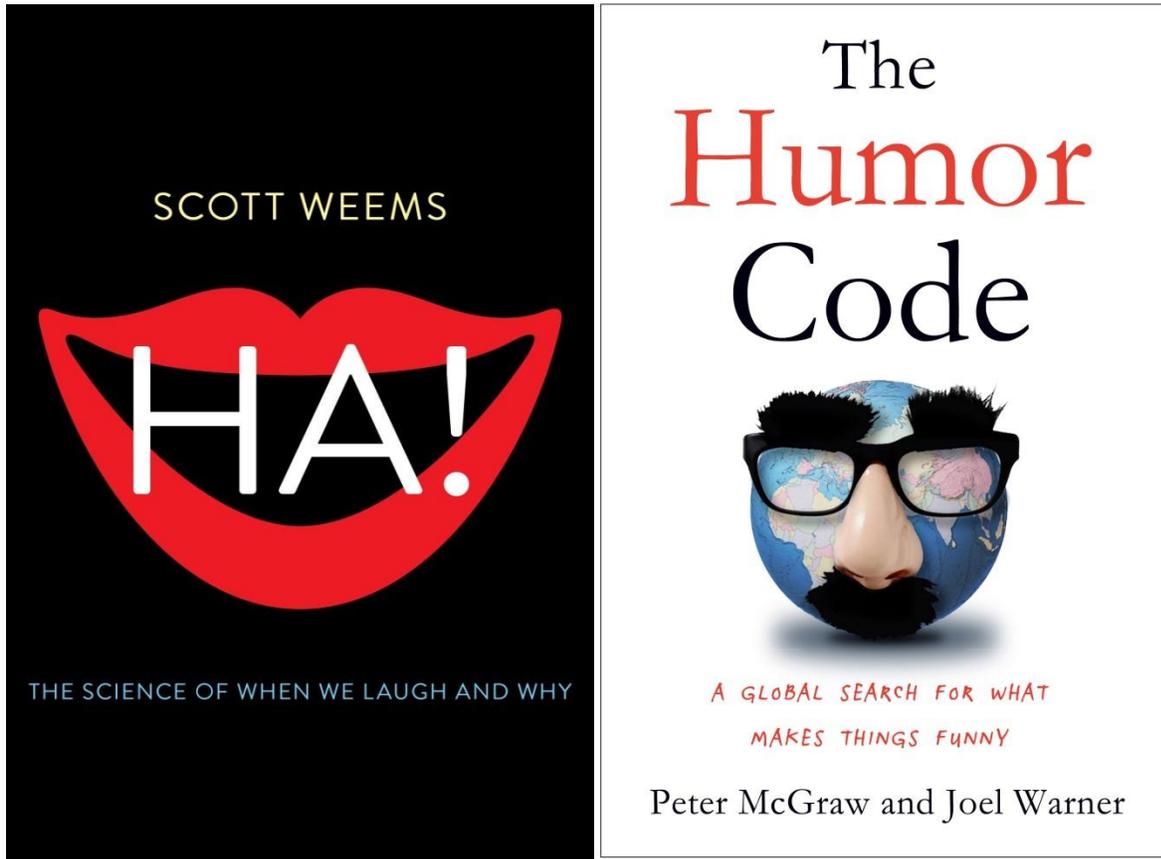


Funny Science

Review: *Ha! The Science of When We Laugh and Why* and *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*

By Robert R. Provine, Ph.D.



In Robert Provine's review of Ha: The Science of When We Laugh and Why and The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny, he leans on his own analysis of simple instincts such as laughing and yawning and his research for his own book, Laughter: A Scientific Investigation.

The importance of humor is suggested by the stature of those who have studied it. This formidable group includes Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Darwin. The difficulty of the topic is indicated by our continuing effort to understand it. In contrast to the long history of philosophical analyses, empirically based humor study is little more than 100 years old. Two recent books for general audiences provide very different progress reports from the frontiers of humor science.

The first, *Ha: The Science of When We Laugh and Why*, by Scott Weems, a cognitive neuroscientist and postdoctoral research associate at the University of Maryland, takes us on a lighthearted tour of things funny. Mindful of the cliché that analysis kills humor, Weems starts with an amusing anecdote about groundbreaking comedian Lenny Bruce and maintains a high humor quotient throughout, mostly straddling the thin line between entertainment and revelation. Can some popularizers of humor studies try too hard to be funny? Borrowing a quote from humor scholar Victor Raskin in Weems' introduction, "[P]sychiatrists don't try to sound neurotic or delusional when describing schizophrenia, so why should humor researchers try to be funny?" What about reviewers of books about humor? It's informative that no one wants to be seen as lacking a sense of humor.

When not trying to entertain, Weems avers, ". . . humor and its most common symptom—laughter—are by-products of possessing brains which rely on conflict," and this conflict is desirable because it encourages adaptability. Further, humor is "closely associated with nearly every aspect of human cognition," "the healthiest way to stay cognitively sharp" and "strongly related to intelligence." In case you missed the point, Weems reminds us, "Nearly every aspect of our lives is improved by focusing on humor." Weems makes a good point about the variety of humor processing, given the many kinds of humor, from pun to pratfall, and its many channels of delivery, from spoken word to vision. As he suggests, humor really is a kind of IQ test—which is a theme of the delightful French film *Ridicule*.

If you want your cognitive neuroscience with a smiley face, Weems is your man. He caters to the feel-good, be-happy modern audience of positive psychology by underplaying laughter's dark side, which was a concern of the ancients. Plato, for example, was motivated by fear of laughter's power, not improving health of the quality of his stand-up. If you doubt the danger of laughter, ask a politician earning mention on a late-night comedy show, even one not named [Anthony] Weiner. Carelessly targeted laughter can trigger a beating.

Few people deny that laughter provides pleasure, but can we really "laugh our way to health," as suggested by clown/physician Patch Adams and the late writer/editor Norman Cousins (*Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*)? Weems is optimistic about the prospects of medicinal laughter. He underplays contrary evidence, such as the cited large-scale, long-term study of Howard Friedman at the University of California, Riverside, which indicated that conscientiousness, not humor, predicts longevity. Better news comes from pain studies that report an analgesic effect of comedy and laughter. Perhaps we are expecting too much from laughter, a vocalization that, like speech, evolved to change the behavior of other people, not to improve our health.

The neuroscience of Weems is of the "my-brain-made-me-do-it" variety, based on the notion that, when faced with a clash of ideas, the brain's conflict detector (the anterior cingulate) fires up, provides a dose of feel-good dopamine, and somehow yields ha-ha. Does this casual "neurologizing" earn its keep? The answer is a tentative maybe. Even devout worshipers at the Church of Neuroscience may question the limits of imaging to understand a joke, or of dopamine to understand its reward.

Weems may be pardoned for not solving the problem of humor, one of history's oldest and thorniest. But complex problems need not be confronted head-on, as they are here, even when bolstered by brain images. Why not adopt the simple system approach useful in attacking other complex biological systems, thereby focusing on the simple act of "ha" of the book's title instead of wading into the swamp of cognition? The simple systems approach, guided by an evolutionary

perspective, has registered counterintuitive discoveries uncited by Weems. For example, the modern human ha-ha evolved from the ancestral pant-pant—the sound of labored breathing of tickle and the rough-and-tumble of our primate ancestors. Ha-ha is literally the sound of play that announces, “This is play; I’m not attacking you.”

Overall, *Ha* delivers a genial, mostly derivative, neurologically oriented introduction to humor science. It easily could have been a much stronger and more versatile book. In present form, it’s often difficult to identify core ideas and to follow arguments, and its thinly veiled advocacy reduces its intellectual heft. The book has a rudimentary index, no bibliography, no citations in the text, and only select references in the endnotes for each chapter, leaving unclear who did what and frustrating those who want to read further or to check facts. Topics and people cited in the text may or may not appear in the index. For example, Victor Raskin appears in the index, but not regarding his quotation used above. The potential of the book as an authoritative reference is diminished by its casual and incomplete referencing, not its breezy style.

In *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, authors Peter McGraw and Joel Warner team up to present a flamboyant road show in the spirit of the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby films of yore. Journalist/writer Warner is the straight man and chronicler of the antics of “Professor Pete” McGraw, University of Colorado professor of business, psychologist, humor researcher, and wannabe comedian, as they tour the world in search of the holy grail of humor. The book grew out of a series of articles that Warner published about McGraw in *Wired* and elsewhere, and the duo sometimes communicates more about the human condition than about the science of mirth, but I won’t quibble. This is a delightful conception, executed with verve, warmth, and, well, humor.

With the authors at the wheel, readers join an investigation of comedy clubs in Los Angeles, *New Yorker* cartoonists in Manhattan, the site of the laughter epidemic in Tanzania (a topic in *Ha*), cultural challenges in Japan, besieged cartoonists of the prophet Muhammad in Denmark, humor in troubled Palestine, and Patch Adams’ medicinal clowning in Peru. The Grand Tour climaxes at the

Just for Laughs festival in Montreal, where Professor Pete put his hard-won comedic knowledge to practical test in a stand-up routine before a major-league audience. Pete didn't kill, but he got some laughs and survived with his dignity intact. Although the device of the tour is a bit contrived, it yields fresh material involving conversations with leading players and earns its keep. I wonder who paid for it.

A major theme in the book is the worldwide test of McGraw's Benign Violation Theory, which posits that in order to be funny, an event must be a violation of the norm, must seem benign, and must satisfy both conditions simultaneously. In other words, slipping on a banana peel is funny only when the victim is not injured. In marketing their idea, the authors learned that humor scholars are a tough crowd, where upstarts can earn a knee in the groin from irascible elders. Given that the book is not a theoretical treatise, I'll give McGraw a pass on his plausible premise—plenty of other humor experts will gladly provide a critique, with the enthusiasm of lions stalking a wounded wildebeest.

The Humor Code should not be criticized for what it is not: It is not a textbook of humor/laughter science, a how-to book for aspiring comedians, or a comprehensive monograph about humor theory. What it does very well is to introduce the vast, engaging, challenging terrain of the comic and to inspire readers to explore further. The thoughtful and detailed endnotes/bibliography and index will assist readers wishing to do the latter.

Peter McGraw in *The Humor Code* and Scott Weems in *Ha* both conclude their books with a display of their stand-up skills, prompting anticipation of face-to-face comedic combat between these scientists of the funny.

Note from the author: Readers wanting to learn more about humor from a carefully reasoned evolutionary, cognitive, and philosophical perspective are directed to the excellent *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, by Hurley, Dennett, and Adams. My book, *Laughter: A*

Scientific Investigation, complements the above with an analysis of the vocal act of laughter. Those seeking an enjoyable, wide-ranging perspective about what neuroscience can and can't tell us about how we feel will find wise counsel in Frazzetto's *Joy, Guilt, Anger, Love: What Neuroscience Can—and Can't—Tell Us About How We Feel*.

Bio

Robert R. Provine, Ph.D., is professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. After training in developmental neuroscience at Washington University and investigating neurobehavioral development in many species, he developed a novel, low-tech approach to human brain mechanisms that he terms "sidewalk neuroscience," which is based on the analysis of simple instincts such as laughing and yawning. As a bonus, the contagion of these behaviors provides an entrée to the neurological basis of social behavior. Provine is a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. His research is described in *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* and *Curious Behavior: Yawning, Laughing, Hiccupping, and Beyond*.