

Ellianah Burgess

Dr. Maureen Gallagher

First-Year Seminar

13 December 2023

Generational Jewish Comedy: A Review of the Introduction of *Funny, You Don't Look Funny* by

Jennifer Caplan



Jennifer Caplan is an American scholar of religion and culture, specializing in Judaism. In her introduction, she makes it clear from the beginning that she isn't trying to define "Jewish humor" or decipher its meaning. In fact, she believes the question is unanswerable. Instead, her book aims to track the interactions between Jewish people throughout four generations—each one with their own chapter, highlighting how their humor has changed overtime. Caplan values how religion has influenced humorists, and provides insight into how Jewish comedians maintain

their cultural identity and connect with their heritage while still contributing to the broader comedic landscape.

According to Caplan, Jewish people were not always funny. One of her main claims is that “inherited baggage” (11) from one generation to the next has shaped Jewish comedy, and that history has influenced its evolution. For instance, World War II impacted how the Silent Generation coped using comedy, which influenced how the Baby Boomers shaped their own jokes. She describes how the older a generation is, the less likely they are to identify with the generations classified by American sociologists. Originally, immigration defined the generations of Jewish people in America, with the first generation settling during the Silent Generation (b. 1925-45). She paraphrases Bill Brown’s Thing Theory in her work, which is the process of “Thingifying” Judaism into a cultural object separate from religion (3). It’s a phenomenon of habit that leads to concepts having social value, which leads to her other main point.

The second argument in this introduction is that religion has shaped Jewish comedy, yet its presence is inconspicuous. Caplan calls into focus how younger generations put Adam Sandler before God in their list of Jewish icons, which demonstrates how “the line between religion and culture becomes increasingly blurry when religion itself seems to be a cultural object” (9). Sandler’s comedy often involves Judaism, but he uses it as a “Thing” to remark on rather than a religious outlet (as is consistent with most modern Jewish comedians). Jennifer Caplan utilizes her book to show that Jewish humor wouldn’t exist without its roots in Judaism, but that the presence of Jewish related content has increased as a result of young Jewish-American identity. This relationship is very complicated when considering her concept of “Thingifying.” Satire and stereotypes have become a huge platform for how Jewish people relate to each other, which had

no significance when Judaism was more of a Biblical association and less of a concept of civilization.

Caplan writes this content for the living and future generations of people from Jewish descent and/or identity, but her message of how culture and history shape what makes us laugh allow her ideas to reach a larger audience. I believe this makes her writing an incredibly valuable resource; her ideas allow everyone to look at their personal culture and familial generations and relate them to how they view humor, as well as the world. I personally gained a better insight into my faith after reading this, therefore I especially recommend this book to Jewish people due to the historical content, but I would recommend it to anyone interested in learning more about themselves and humor as abroad scope.

Works Cited:

Image created in Canva

Caplan, Jennifer. Introduction, *Funny, You Don't Look Funny: Judaism and Humor from the Silent Generation to Millennials*. Wayne State University Press, 2023.

“Jennifer Ann Caplan.” *Expert Profile: Jennifer Caplan | Research Directory*,  
[researchdirectory.uc.edu/p/caplanjr#:~:text=Jennifer%20Ann%20Caplan&text=I%20am%20a%20scholar%20of,sites%20of%20pop%20culture%20engagement](https://researchdirectory.uc.edu/p/caplanjr#:~:text=Jennifer%20Ann%20Caplan&text=I%20am%20a%20scholar%20of,sites%20of%20pop%20culture%20engagement). Accessed 13 Dec. 2023.