

What's so funny about tragedy? Some new books try to answer



Sam Kinison in Los Angeles in 1988. (Jeff Kravitz / FilmMagic)



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At a Saturday afternoon memorial service for journalist Wade Nelson, many funny stories were told and much laughter echoed through the stately Unity Temple in Oak Park.

There were also plenty of tears.

That's the way it is, isn't it, sorrow and humor often in some existential balancing act?

But why?

I have been for decades searching for an answer, and recently I discovered a new one. It comes in the new book "The Importance of Being Funny" (Rowman & Littlefield, July 2017) by local writer, professor and radio

personality Al Gini. He reminds us that [Mel Brooks](#) has argued that we need jokes “as a defense against the universe.”

Gini goes on to write, “We need humor to fight off our fear of living. Joke-telling is an attempt to keep at a distance our fear of the unknown, the unanswerable, and the unacceptable.”

And since life keeps throwing the unknown, the unanswerable, and the unacceptable at us with ever-increasing frequency, do we need humor more than ever?

It is all but impossible to argue with Bert Haas, who has heard millions of jokes since he started as a waiter at the first Zanies comedy club in 1980 and is now executive vice president of the four-club operation. He told me years ago, “When we are confronted with tragedy we use laughter to release tension.”

So, have you heard the one about Hurricane Irma?

Those jokes are out there and though some will find them sick and tasteless, others will, often against their better judgment, laugh at them. Be aware that a number of those jokes, that some people may find insensitive or worse, are explored below.

There may be a darker side to all of this.

Mort Sahl, the greatest living stand-up comic and political satirist, once told me, “Nothing inspires the people who make jokes more than the misfortune of others. There's a kind of sadism in it. The reason people laugh, I think, is in response to the country's politically correct climate. This humor taps into the suppression of people's innate rage.”

In his fine and insightful 1987 book, “Going Too Far: The Rise and Demise of Sick, Gross, Black, Sophomoric, Weirdo, Pinko, Anarchist, Underground, Anti-Establishment Humor” (Doubleday), author Tony Hendra argues that the jokes that arise with chilling speed from contemporary disasters simply reaffirm brutality, insensitivity and racism. They are, he writes, “the jokes of, not against, a thuggish collective mind.”

Nothing — except for perhaps the death of children — is out of bounds. I have heard “jokes” about the Holocaust, John Wayne Gacy, Sept. 11 and every other misfortune or monster.

It was in a comedy club that I heard some people in the crowd shout “shuttle jokes, shuttle jokes” only a few days after the Jan. 28, 1986, [explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger](#), a tragedy that killed seven people.

The comic, whose name I can no longer recall, happily obliged:

What does NASA stand for? Need Another Seven Astronauts.

And laughter filled to room, as it did on another night when the late Sam Kinison took on the story of the Crucifixion, saying, “So, there are 40 Christians standing around, saying, ‘It’s such a shame that he has to die.’”

And Jesus is up there on the cross, saying, "Well, maybe I wouldn't have to if somebody would get a ladder and pair of pliers."

Jim Brogan was one of the dozen "Tonight Show" writers during its [Jay Leno](#) years when he told me, "It seems there's one thing to do in a tragedy — either cry or laugh. Laughing helps you distance yourself from the tragedy."

That has become much more difficult with round-the-clock coverage on television and, of course, with the ubiquitous onslaught from the internet and social media. A tragedy strikes and within minutes you will find people trying to be "funny" about it, many hiding behind the convenient and cowardly mask of anonymity.

Late-night hosts have never been reluctant to practice this laughter-in-the-face-of-death business. Days after the 1996 arrest of terrorist/killer Ted Kaczynski (aka the Unabomber) there was Leno offering us the "Unabomber Dancers" and [David Letterman](#) saying, "We took this guy from an 8-by-10 shack and moved him into an 8-by-10 cell. Boy, we really showed him."

Many of the current TV late night hosts will forgo the jokes for personal essays about topical subjects. They can be impassioned and often compelling.

But the recent death of Playboy founder Hugh Hefner compelled [Jimmy Kimmel](#) to joke about the cause of death, saying, "They won't be able to rule out foul play for quite some time because of all the DNA evidence they found in the house. ... It might take 20 years," and about Hefner's possible reaction to heaven, "What's with all these harps? Let's get some naked girls in here."

Gini's book is slender at 141 pages, but stunningly insightful (and, don't get me wrong, a great deal of fun too). "My steadfast belief is that humor is an attempt to deal with the palpable absurdity of life," he writes. "Although humor cannot always resolve all of our dilemmas, questions, and terrors, it can ease the pain of our perplexities and allow us to carry on as best we can."

Hefner is the focus of "Playboy Laughs: The Comedy, Comedians, and Cartoons of Playboy" (Beaufort Books, August 2017). This is the second in author Patty Farmer's trilogy about the Bunny empire, following her 2015 "Playboy Swings," about the company's influence on music. Next up will be "Playboy Thinks," about the magazine's intellectual and philosophical substance.

She does a terrific, well-researched job and interviews scores of comics, among them Chicago's own Tom Dreesen. She also correctly notes that Playboy bridged the "gap between the nightclubs of the '50s and the comedy clubs of the '70s. Without the support Hefner provided, standup may well have dwindled away. It would certainly not have developed into the robust art form it is today."

That "art form," those clubs, provides a vast network of stages for humor, about everything. Yes, some of what you hear in the wake of a disaster might be in bad taste but in this increasing icy world being together with other people can be a healthy and restorative thing. Shared laughter can provide shelter from the storms.

So, have you heard the one about the Las Vegas slaughter?

Too soon?

Don't bet on it.

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