

THEY  
USED TO  
CALL ME  
SNOW  
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BUT I  
DRIFTED

**WOMEN'S  
STRATEGIC  
USE OF  
HUMOR**

*"An impassioned, wily,  
and often hilarious  
argument for women  
leash their sense of  
humor  
on the world."*

—Chicago Tribune



REGINA BARRECA

*Regina Barreca*

.....

*They Used to  
Call Me  
Snow White . . .  
But I Drifted*

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*Women's Strategic Use  
of Humor*



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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Books USA Inc.,  
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane,  
London W8 5TZ, England  
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,  
Victoria, Australia  
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2  
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,  
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:  
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by  
Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc., 1991  
Published in Penguin Books 1992

9 10

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THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGUED THE HARDCOVER AS FOLLOWS:

Barreca, Regina.

They used to call me Snow White : women's strategic use of humor /  
Regina Barreca.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-670-83801-2 (hc.)

ISBN 0 14 01.6835 4 (pbk.)

1. Wit and humor—Psychological aspects. 2. Women—Psychology.

I. Title.

BF575.L3B37 1991

155.3'33—dc20 90-50511

Printed in the United States of America  
Set in Sabon

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# *Acknowledgments*



Sometimes the demands of a linear argument are even worse than others: there is no way to order these acknowledgments so that everybody comes out in the right place. Everybody, to be honest, deserves to be first on the list of thanks. The comedians and comic writers who generously offered their time for interviews deserve to come first: Nicole Hollander, Cynthia Heimel, Joy Behar, Susie Essman, Lara Kightlinger, among others. Their counterparts in the business and professional world should also be first: Mary Davis, Natalie Becker, Pamela West, Lynette Lager, among many others. The women who have prepared patterns for feminist criticism in general and about humor in particular are clearly the ones who should be mentioned before anyone else: Nancy Walker, Judith Wilt, Judy Little, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Mary Daly, Jane Marcus, Rachel Brownstein, Nina Auerbach, Mary Ann Caws—with special thanks to Margaret Higonnet—and the dozens of other critics and teachers whose ideas have permanently changed the color of our thinking the way a drop of ink spreads through water. Thanks, too, to everyone in *Last Laughs*, to my students who

have been relentlessly honest and riotously entertaining, and to my colleagues at the University of Connecticut.

There is no doubt that I must thank Fay Weldon before thanking another soul, since I would have lacked the courage to write this book but for her encouragement, affection, and inspiration; she was central to its creation. So was Rose Quiello, whose indefatigable research and constant support helped me through good and bad days alike, and whose laughter (and occasional lack thereof) shaped the book in its early days. Although men have perhaps grown too accustomed to leading the list to be permitted to continue doing so, a number of men should be mentioned at the very beginning: Michael Meyer, always full of surprises (*sic*), whose annoyingly accurate remarks scribbled in the margins of the book made life harder and the book better; John Glavin, who listened and directed with his inimitable flair for the dramatic and the good; as well as Lee Jacobus and Scott Bradfield, whose attention and good advice sustained me through some trying times. Before I mention them, however, I should thank Sue Watkins for her thorough and enormously useful reading of the manuscript.

But first of all I must mention my female friends, those women who have offered their stories, support, and love with equal generosity: Bonnie Januszewski, who was at the slumber party all those years ago and who has remained an excellent conspirator ever since; Pam Katz, whose wit and imagination make her one of the world's best companions; Nancy Lager, who laughs more than she lets the world know; Bette Talvacchia, whose dry and cool humor acts like a tonic; and Mary Ann Yanulis, who always asked the right questions and supplied the right smile, giggle, or laugh. There are other friends to thank as well, including Joe Cuomo, Brenda Gross, J. J. Martindale, Tim Taylor, and Robert Zweig. Indeed, the women who have supported the book throughout the process of publication must be thanked immediately: Carole DeSanti, whose early support of the project turned it from a project into a book; Diane

Cleaver, who helped guide the manuscript to a good home; Nan Graham, who dealt swiftly and wonderfully with the text; Kathryn Harrison, who was a great help; and Gillian Silverman, who answered all my questions with patience and accuracy.

Nevertheless, it is certain that those people who have put up with me the longest deserve both my initial and my continuing gratitude: my father, Hugo, merits first place for his patience and love, alongside my brother, Hugo, for his wit and impatient understanding, and my sister-in-law, Wendy Schlemm, for her delight at a well-told story. Before any of them, however, I wish I could thank my mother, Antonine, who, although she died far too young, left for me the gift of a wicked sensibility coupled with an unembarrassed enjoyment of the absurdities of life. It is an honor to dedicate this book to my father and to the memory of my mother.

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# I

## Getting It

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### *Strategies for Recognizing and Using Gender Differences in Humor*

#### *Seeing the Differences*

.....

I grew up watching *The Dating Game* and *The Newlywed Game* and soon became aware of the differences between the way men and women deal with humor (I called them boys and girls then, but the theory still holds). On *The Dating Game*, answers could be sort of dirty; on *The Newlywed Game*, answers could be really dirty, because the couples were already married. The idea was to make people in the live audience laugh; they shrieked with laughter when the contestants got something wrong: "What does your spouse miss most about his bachelor days?" Her answer: "Playing baseball." His answer: "Playing the field." When the honeymooners on *The Newlywed Game* agreed and gave the same answer, nothing was funny. If he also said baseball, nobody laughed. Agreement was cute, sweet, nice, but cute, sweet, and nice never kept company with funny. The losers kept the show going, but they never won the Amana range. The badly matched couples were the stars because they were the ones everybody tuned in to watch, but they went home empty-



handed. The imperfect couple couldn't be rewarded even if they were terrifically entertaining. They didn't fit. They never would be the proud owners of an apricot-colored lounge suite.

But there was something wrong with this picture, even to my pre-liberation—early-junior-high-school mind. Why was the perfect couple so dull and yet so privileged? Why were the funny, nasty, arm-punching pairs sent home with only garden hoses and blenders? Something was out of place; the boat was in the tree, or the duck was flying upside down. I stared at the television and tried to figure it out.

On *The Dating Game*, my girlfriends and I always picked the boys who were funny. All the contestants were pretty cute. Even the bad choices on *The Dating Game* looked good to us, because they were all over seventeen and probably could drive. But the boys we really liked, the boys we went for, were the boys who had a sense of humor. The boys who could make us laugh. Making us laugh was the boy's job.

The job of the show's bachelorette was to ask questions that sounded innocent enough but could be answered by lines stiff with innuendo. The audience was given permission to understand the double meaning (clean/dirty) and laugh in appreciation of the guy's worldliness and wit, but the female contestant could not, under any circumstances, show that she understood the underlying meaning. If she laughed, she was doomed, because her laughter would give away a terrible secret about her: that she *got the joke*. That she knew what he was talking about. If she asked "If we were on a date and the car's tire went flat, what would you do?" and he answered "I'm always prepared. I'd just get out my pump and do what I could . . ." she had to provide the requisite glassy stare. No way could she react except by waiting until the audience finished laughing. She couldn't return his volley by saying something like "Why get out your pump right away? How about finding out what kind of pressure is needed?" If the question had been asked on *The Newlywed Game*, and the wife had answered that he should

get out his pump, that would have been okay. The married lady was allowed to make such remarks, although she still had to maintain some sort of decorum. She couldn't, for example, really smile when she made the remark, even if her husband was grinning from ear to ear. But she would have at least been allowed to say it. The bachelorette could not betray any understanding of the sexual innuendo. She had to be the Barbie doll, the virgin sacrifice, and the potentially perfect wife all at once. She wasn't allowed to make a dirty joke; she wasn't allowed to react to the man's joke, nor even allowed to be offended at the overtly sexual nature of his reply. It was in his script to make the dirty joke, and it was in her script only to smile. The girl couldn't laugh, because Good Girls just didn't "get it"—"it" being, almost inevitably, the not-so-hidden sexual meaning in male humor.

***Good Girls Don't Get It***  
.....

Where I grew up, the rules of *The Dating Game* applied to real life. Good Girls didn't get it, or much of anything else. Not only didn't Good Girls have premarital sex (which is what everybody really cared about), there was a long list of binary oppositions mapping the territory of the Good Girl and the Bad. One group had to exist in order for the other to be defined. Good Girls wore miniskirts but not hot pants. Good Girls wore patterned tights but not fishnets. Good Girls wore bras and were embarrassed if the tops showed above the blouse line. Or if any trace of nipple could be detected through the fabric (the female equivalent of the male fear of a sudden erection on the way to the front of the class). Bad Girls bounced. Even after Good Girls stopped wearing bras (after the late sixties had established that even Good Girls could have some mild politics), they usually wore some Laura Ashley-type printed undershirt, and their breasts just stayed put, out of general good behavior. Good Girls kept their knees together.

The image of the Good Girl was a product developed in a conspiracy among parents, the media, and advertising, with support from the church, educational and economic institutions, and the government in general. Good Girls didn't make trouble for anybody. They did what they were told, whether that was keeping their rooms clean, watching TV while they baby-sat on Saturday nights, or buying all the current Cover Girl merchandise. They never questioned why women weren't allowed to be priests or rabbis, always handed in homework on time, and did not support such revolutionary causes as equal rights for minorities or women. Good Girls were taught to believe that everything would continue to be just fine, and that someone else was out there taking care of things. Good Girls did not draw attention to themselves or their ideas. They looked around to see what the other people in the audience were doing before they let themselves smile or cry, because, after a certain point, they had learned not to trust their instincts. Laugh tracks were invented so that the audience would have a guide to the appropriate response. And Good Girls, we were told, laughed with their mouths shut, if they laughed at all.

Significantly, Good Girls didn't keep raising their hands in class even if they always knew the answer. That was showing off, and Good Girls didn't show off. It was showing off if you said you wanted to go to college, or go to a "good" college, or go to medical school after college. "Ambitious" was still not a very nice thing to call a lady until these past few years, until we learned to see that we needed to acknowledge our ambitions if we were going to succeed in our professions. Or that we needed ambition to have professions at all. Saying a woman was ambitious was like saying she was selfish, crass, or bad tempered. Not very feminine. Not the attributes of someone well behaved or well brought up.

We have had to learn to embrace the idea of ourselves as striving for our goals, as aiming for success, as willing to set our sights for the very top. We have learned to love the thought

of our own ambition. And we are learning to love our own laughter, to see that our sense of humor makes sense and can help us make sense of the world around us. Which means re-learning to trust our instincts and to stop checking whether the guy sitting next to us is laughing before we laugh. If it's funny, we should let ourselves laugh, loud and clear. Mary Davis, a vice president of Time-Warner, Inc., and director of Magazine Manufacturing and Distribution, argues, "It is as important for a woman to speak up during a meeting to make a pertinent funny remark as it is for her to speak up to make any important point. It shows that her mind is working fast and well, and that she's willing to take the risk of being funny because she has confidence that she'll get the desired response. The ability to joke, a confident sense of humor, is as much a leadership quality in women as it is in men."

*C'mon and Smile, Sweetie*  
.....

Humor means more than being able to laugh at a man's joke. We always knew that we had to smile at his stories, giggle at his jokes. Nobody said we should giggle at his jokes only if we found them funny; we had to giggle at his jokes even when we thought they were dull, insulting, or dumb. We were expected to look into his eyes and laugh invitingly, even if the story wasn't amusing. We are still supposed to "fake a passion that's bound to turn men on," meaning that we're supposed to read our part of the script correctly. We are supposed to give the desired response instead of expressing whatever response is actually our own. That piece of advice is from a recent issue of *Cosmopolitan*, by the way, and refers to showing enthusiasm for sports even when you don't have any. The idea that women should be interested in what bores them—or laugh at what they do not find funny—still holds sway.

When we were growing up, a lot of girls tried not to laugh at what they themselves found funny, at least not around boys.

In a book typical of its era and values, *Teen Scene—1001 Groovy Hints and Tips* (published in 1972), the advisers sum it all up: “You may be a quick wit with your girl friends, but cool it when he’s around.” If you were a Good Girl, you giggled and tittered (although you had to be crazy to use that word), smirked and smiled. How you smiled! Smiling was allowed, encouraged, even demanded. The general sentiment was “Laugh at his jokes, but do it naturally. Nobody likes the donkey’s hee-haw some girls are saddled with.” Laughing out loud was out of the question.

One observant viewer of early sixties movies, the comedy writer Anne Beatts, notes that Annette Funicello, the original fun-date Good Girl, never laughed. The boys would joke around, and Annette would give a little, almost maternally indulgent “boys will be boys” smile, or she’d stamp her foot impatiently, with just a trace of pleasure, in protest of the joke that was not quite nice enough to suit her fastidious tastes. Annette never cracked a joke: “She didn’t even laugh; she just put her hands on her hips and got mad at Ricky or Tommy or Eddie or whoever was carrying her surfboard, so that they could tell her how cute she was when she was mad.” The slightly corrupt “vocational school” girls did joke with the boys, however, and came to a bad end. Their ability to joke was seen as evidence of both their sexual awareness and their lack of femininity, although how these two can be paired without canceling each other out raises some complex issues. The girls with scary hairdos, black leather jackets, heavy eye makeup, and spiked heels (or low, pointed leather boots) chewed gum and laughed with their heads thrown back.

But Good or Bad, women have been labeled as “unfunny,” as less likely to laugh than their male counterparts. It’s been an unspoken but unwavering assumption that women and men have different reactions to humor, as well as different ways of using it. The noted psychologist Rose Laub Coser argues, “In

this culture women are expected to be passive and receptive, rather than active and initiating. A woman who has a good sense of humor is one who laughs (but not too loudly!) when a man makes a witticism or tells a good joke. . . . The man provides; the woman receives.” Beatts makes much the same point in her article “Why More Women Aren’t Funny”: “If you say that a girl has a sense of humor it typically means only that she gets the joke, not that she makes any jokes of her own. A boy with a sense of humor, on the other hand, is supposed to supply all the entertainment.” And boys, Beatts observes, learn to count on this pattern: “If you were a boy, having a sense of humor meant pouring salt on the head of the girl who sat in front of you so it would look as though she has dandruff. If you were a girl, having a sense of humor meant laughing when someone poured salt on your head.” The boys made their jokes and we smiled, encouragingly if the prank was directed at somebody else, weakly if we were the object of all the kidding.

*Can't You Take a Joke?*

.....

One of the worst things that could be said about a girl was that she couldn't take a joke. This was almost as bad as getting the joke. There you were, stuck between being afraid to show that you got it and being embarrassed to say that you didn't want to take it. You were supposed to avoid the jokes that had to do with sex, but to be a good sport about the ones that had to do with abuse or insults. Beatts suggests that the cliché “women have no sense of humor” was started by a girl who just couldn't put up with the salt poured on her head one more time.

This relationship to joking put girls in a position similar to the sexual dilemma that proposed we be attractive but unavailable, caught between being cheap and being prudish. We were taught not to trust our own instincts but instead to submit to the established script, laughing along with the laugh track.

***Good Girls Can and Do Laugh  
with Their Mouths Open***  
.....

Even the Goodest Girls have a Bad Girl inside who not only gets it but who gives it and, maybe worst of all, isn't going to take it from anybody. We are brought up to believe that the Good Girl/Bad Girl split is natural, right, unchanging, and definitive. Like the myth that women have no sense of humor, the idea that we can't be sweet and wicked at the same time just isn't true. Good Girls can and do laugh with their mouths open.

Despite all the pressure not to, we found ways to laugh. Some of us were better than others at keeping it under cover and acceptable. We laughed, for example, at slumber parties, where we'd pool our scant sexual knowledge and scream hysterically into pillows about what we'd heard. At one such party, I remember, was a friend who had managed to steal a condom from her older brother's underwear drawer. We examined the evidence, trying to figure out what the male sexual organ was really like—textbooks never supplied details. The condom didn't help much, even when it was unraveled. Surely it was as misleading as the panty hose that comes scrunched up in the L'Eggs package; how could you tell what they looked like when somebody put them *on*? Being a scientific group—or so we thought—we decided that the one way to find out size and shape was to fill the condom with water. I was elected to carry out the task. When I returned to the basement where we were all piled into sleeping bags, I was carrying something nearly a foot long and about three inches around. My friend Annemarie started to weep softly in one corner, and the rest of us tried to imagine what happened to one's internal organs. Surely your liver had to move around to accommodate this thing? But even though we were ill informed, insecure, and utterly horrified, we were together. So, together, we laughed out loud, for hours, until our hostess's father yelled from upstairs, telling us to be quiet.

*Can Men Get It?*  
.....

It's important to keep in mind that the focus of this discussion is the way men and women react in general. Of course, there are men confident enough, generous enough, and smart enough to laugh at our jokes when they understand or find them funny, and who, even when they don't get it, allow us our own laughter undisturbed. But let us remember that there are also men who find it a physical impossibility to read more than three sentences about women without retreating, as the author Joanna Russ has catalogued them in *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, to their personalized version of the following "rational" and "status-enhancing" remarks: "Hm! How can you prove that?" "Not all women." "I think we have to examine your assumptions."

You can tell some men that they're insensitive and immune to the subtleties and textures of the finest aspects of existence, and they'll nod sheepishly in agreement. You can tell some of them that the appropriation of power, based on force and ill will, has resulted in a culture of thievery, baseness, and ignorance and they'll protest but feel compelled to agree. Tell them that men create art only because they cannot have children, tell them that paternity is a legal fiction—but just don't tell them that you know a joke that they won't get. They'll kill you. They simply don't believe that you could laugh at something they won't appreciate. Tell them there are gender differences in humor, and they'll block your way to the door until you've told them, like Scheherazade, every story you've ever heard so that they can show you how much, how very equally, they laugh.

Many men get uneasy when they're not included in something. Professor Emily Toth of Pennsylvania State University tells a story illustrating this point concerning her book *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*. She and her collaborators did the talk-show circuit to promote the book. During one such



program the host was angry that she'd written an "anti-male book." "Why don't you give equal time to men?" he demanded. Give equal time to men in a book on menstruation? "In fact," Professor Toth writes, "we did have a chapter on male menstruators—but his objection was really to the bold idea that one sex could be relegated to being a special interest or sideshow." Of course, women have until very recently occupied just such a "sideshow" position. Men want to know that they're not missing the good part, that the material isn't being cut or changed before they get a chance to see it. They can then decide they don't like it, that it's boring or insignificant, but they want to be in the position to decide. If you say that a woman has a sense of humor that's different from a man's, a man might well interpret "different" as meaning "inferior." If you disagree, you might make him nervous and defensive, which will mean, of course, that he won't be able to laugh at anything naturally at that moment, no matter how funny he might have found it under other circumstances. At this point, it's likely that he'll tell you that he finds whatever joke you tell him funny even if he says it through clenched teeth. Or he'll tell you that the reason you think your sense of humor is different is because, in his judgment, it's nonexistent. You might then be subject to endless stories about all the humorless women he's ever met until you either walk out of the room on him or kiss him to keep him quiet. In the case of a man who doesn't think women are funny, the first option is far healthier.

Of course, some women come to laughter unmediated by all the mythology the rest of us have prepurchased like a package deal. Some women, brave and fortunate souls that they are, have always known that having a sense of humor is important and wonderful. These women will be shocked at the timid nature of the rest of us, who have to learn to laugh, or relearn to enjoy and use humor. But they will no doubt be able to help us in our endeavors, charting the course. We all need support in our struggle to rediscover ourselves in order to laugh out loud.