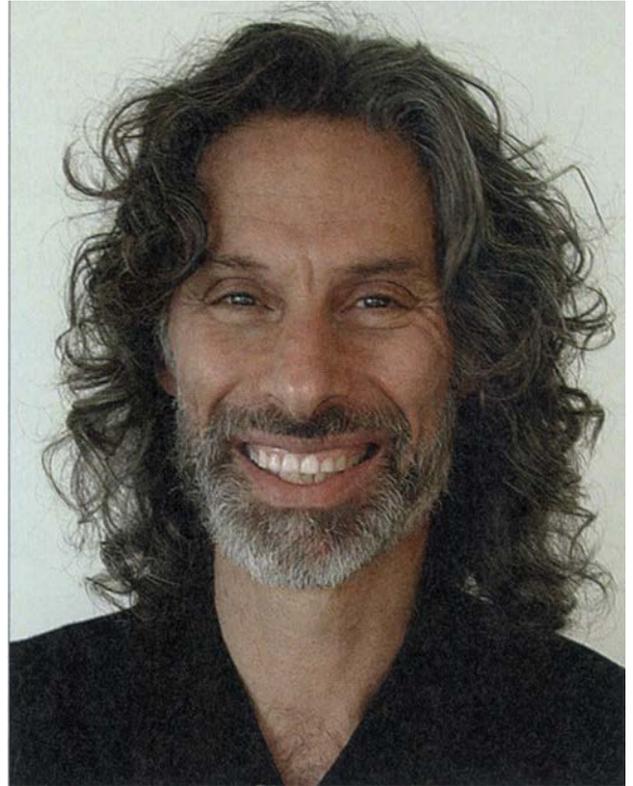


New Yorker Cartoonmeister Bob Mankoff

When *The New Yorker* cartoon editor Bob Mankoff isn't thumbing through submissions—trying to choose what's funny and what's not (and why)—he's in his studio, drawing cartoons. More than 900 have been published in *The New Yorker* in the past 30 years. Mankoff, editor of *The Complete Cartoons of The New Yorker* and author of *The Naked Cartoonist: A Way to Enhance Your Creativity*, also founded the Cartoon Bank, the world's largest digital archive of magazine cartoons. Armed with life experience and what he calls an "undocumented" Ph.D. (he never finished his dissertation) in psychology, he teaches a course called The Art and Science of Humor at the University of Michigan.

Mankoff lives in Westchester, New York, with his wife and children but grew up in Queens. His parents held his bar mitzvah party at Manhattan's posh Hotel Pierre. "It was about showing how well you had done," he recalls, adding that he still has his bar mitzvah photo album, which he reviews periodically at his wife's suggestion. "I'm in a tuxedo, and I'm reading a book called *What I Know About Women*." Although Mankoff doesn't consider himself religious, he is proud of what Jews have accomplished and created. "I value all of it," he says. "I'm 'pro-Jewish' especially with anyone who's anti—" *Moment* editor Nadine Epstein talked with Mankoff about the psychology and history of Jewish and American humor.



What makes Jewish humor unique?

When you look at Jewish humor, for the most part, the jokes are layered—they build up and eventually show some sort of logical inconsistency, either in the world or ourselves. In the broader culture a majority of jokes have an aggressive component, a scatological component or a sexual component, but Jewish jokes work through understanding our shared vulnerabilities as fallible human beings.

How did it get this way?

Jewish humor is based on a mindset that looks at things from many different angles. The more viewpoints you have, the more ways you have of looking at things and the more complicated your worldview will be—and your humor. The habits of mind acquired by studying the

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Talmud—discussing things seriously and quickly switching perspective—are applied to other subjects.

How does this complexity of Jewish identity play out in the humor itself?

A lot of Jewish humor deals with identity: Jews developed an insider/outsider sensibility in the countries that they came from. If you were Polish, you were Polish-Jewish, or if you were Russian, you were both Russian and Jewish. Then you came to America, and now you're American and Polish, and you're American-Jewish and Polish-Jewish.

Here's an example of a joke that deals with Jewish identity: A Jewish man goes to a rabbi and asks the rabbi, "Rabbi, what should I do? I raised my boy to be a good Jewish boy and he became a Christian. What should

I do?” The rabbi says, “Funny you should ask. I’m a rabbi and I too raised my boy Jewish. My son went to yeshiva and he went and became a Christian.” The man asks the rabbi, “What did you do?” “I asked God.” “What did he say?” “God said, ‘Funny you should ask...’”

Were Jews always funny?

There’s no evidence, looking back to ancient times, that Jews were funny. There aren’t any jokes in the Bible. When Elijah gets mocked by two children for being bald, she-bears come out of the woods and maul them. That’s not the sort of thing that encourages laughter. There is a unique experience, an engagement—sometimes a troubled one—that the Jews have with God. They’ve got to figure out how to obey the rules, but also how to get around them. On Shabbas, for example, many observant people hire a Shabbas *goy*—to perform forbidden acts such as turning on the lights, or the stove. Getting around the rules is intrinsic to the comic vision. If there’s no wiggle room, then there’s no giggle room. There’s a *New Yorker* cartoon that nicely sums this up where a CEO is talking to boardroom members and says “Honesty is the best policy. Okay, what’s the second-best policy?” Rules aren’t made to be broken, but to be fudged. The Jews even have rules for how you break the rules. So there’s a deep engagement with the cognitive part of the world as it relates to both the practical and ethical domains.

Do Jewish jokes have a purpose beyond being funny?

Jews are overthinkers. It’s no surprise that we invented psychoanalysis. Humor is the antidote to overthinking. It’s a way of saying that life is paradoxical. There’s a cartoon of mine where an old guy says, “I don’t want to live forever. On



the other hand I sure as hell don’t want to be dead forever.” Humor contains contradictions; it does not resolve them but revels in them. It says that the right way to exist among the contradictions, paradoxes and absurdities of life is to cope with them through laughter.

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For example, my favorite green chair is in our living room. It’s where I read the paper, where I sit. When we renovated our house and my studio was finished, my wife said, “Now we can get rid of that green chair of yours.” I said, “I don’t want to get rid of it. It’s where I read the paper. It’s where I sit. I love my chair.” She said, “If you like it so much, take it out to your new studio.” And I said, “I don’t want this ratty thing out there.”

What are the origins of the concept of humor?

Originally, it’s not what we relate to as funniness. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, speculated that there were four humors—fluids—in the body: yellow bile, red bile, black bile and phlegm. The proportion of humors determines health. Eventually it was thought that those humors also determined our personality and that an excess of one or the other of them would lead to an excess in a personality characteristic which could be looked on as eccentric or humorous. A person who acted this way was called a “humorist” and a person who imitated

PHOTO AND CARTOONS COURTESY OF BOB MANKOFF



"No, Thursday's out. How about never—is never good for you?"

the strange behavior of a person like this was called "a man of humor." The term, of course, evolved over time but that's its origin.

When did the phrase "sense of humor" come in to use?

In the latter half of the 19th century in England and America. Before that, there was the concept of a sense of the ridiculous that described both our sensitivity to things laughable, intentional or not, and the particular funny things produced by cleverness and wit. At that time there was a distinction between "humor" and "wit." Humor was natural and arose from character, but wit came from mental ingenuity, which could be cultivated and learned. But by the 1870s the concept of a sense of humor that encompassed both was used as we use it today. In heterogeneous cultures like England or the United States, the mingling of all different ethnic groups and classes provided the daily incongruous hustle and bustle that proved a fertile ground for humor. A sense of humor developed as a way to operate and adapt in a complicated, ever changing society.

When did humor become an industry?

By the 1870s a sense of humor was widely accepted as a valuable attribute and someone without one was viewed as deficient. After the Civil War you see the rise of minstrel shows and vaudeville—comic cultures that are commercial and need material. Also you have the emergence of *Punch* in England and a number of college humor magazines in the United States as well as *Judge*—the first American magazine completely devoted to humor. The whole entertainment culture that we have today comes out of the fact that the culture itself started to value humor, and put a monetary value on those who produced it.

When did Jews enter the humor business?

In the early part of the 20th century Jews were very heavily involved in all the entertainment industries, in vaudeville and in Tin Pan Alley, where a virtual factory was making popular songs. Jews were involved because entertainment was now a commercial enterprise. It's a way to make a living

that was open to Jews and suited to their abilities.

Where is the heart of Jewish humor today?

Comedy writing, sitcom writing, radio writing. Obviously there are many Jewish comedians as well. And a lot of the Hollywood comedy films have Jewish backgrounds by way of actors and directors. But Jews are less dominating in cartoons. We are not particularly known for graphic arts. There's that prohibition against graven images.

Who are your favorite Jewish cartoonists?

Certainly Saul Steinberg. He had a unique sensibility and complicated intellectual mindset that went into his drawings. Also William Steig—who first sold a cartoon to *The New Yorker* in 1930, five years after its inception—had a deeply philosophical and humanistic outlook that was consistent with what we think of as a Jewish sensibility. On the neurotic side of the continuum, there's Roz Chast, whose worldview is always informed by a hilarious intellectual paranoia.

Do men and women use humor differently?

For men, humor is used to boost self-presentation both to other men and women. Women like humor that's based on a narrative that shows the funny side of life, a shared sensibility, a "laughing with." That's how they bond. Men—especially young men—prefer aggressive distancing humor, a "laughing at" that helps them defuse the natural aggression they have toward each other so they can remain friends. Both men and women want a sense of humor in a mate. But what that means is that men want women who laugh at their jokes, and women want guys who are funny. ☺