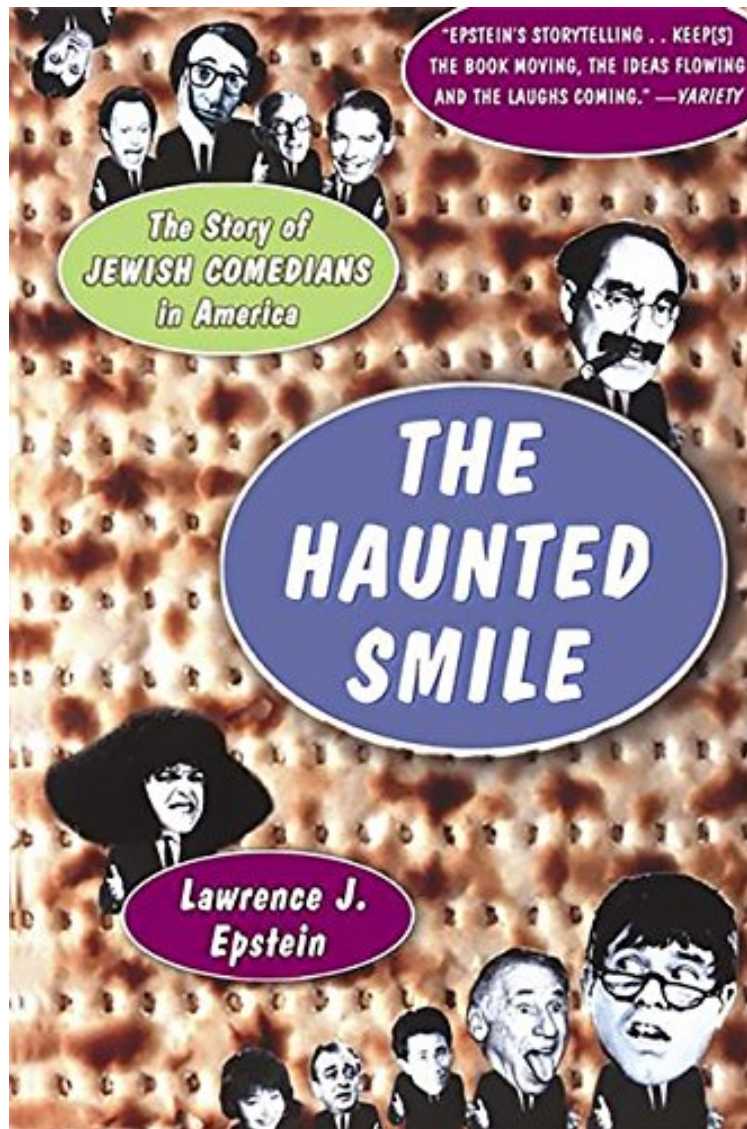


[Free download] The Haunted Smile: The Story Of Jewish Comedians In America

# The Haunted Smile: The Story Of Jewish Comedians In America

Lawrence J. Epstein

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**Lawrence J. Epstein : The Haunted Smile: The Story Of Jewish Comedians In America** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Haunted Smile: The Story Of Jewish Comedians In America:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. FASCINATING READING ABOUT WHAT MAKES THESE PEOPLE TICKBy Michel BrotmanThis is a positive review, but I'm going to start with a word of caution: The cover of the book says it all. The author explains the history and influences that makes our favorite comedians tick. While

there are lots of laughs in these words, this is a very studious and serious analysis of how the history of Jews has impacted their humor. If you're looking for a whole bunch of Jewish humor, you're looking in the wrong place. Nonetheless, this was a fabulous read for smart people. It explains in wonderful detail the method and thinking and history of the icons of humor in America, Jewish or not. But the reason for four instead of five stars is the depths the author went to in making his point. At times, the amount of detail put me to sleep. This is a great book to read before your next dinner party. Tons of great antidotes about the comedy heroes that I want to tell all my friends! 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. All Good. By Paul Herzoff Book. As described. Delivered. All Good. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Interesting Book. By Linda Rubenstein I bought the book because it was recommended by the book club at my synagogue. While the book is interesting, Mr. Epstein make huge leaps in conclusions. Some of what he says appears to have been pulled out of thin air. I would not read it again.

Lawrence Epstein's *The Haunted Smile* tackles a subject both poignant and delightful: the story of Jewish comedians in America. For the past century and more, American comedy has drawn its strength and soul from the comic genius of Jewish performers and writers. An incomplete listing of names makes the point: The Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Fanny Brice, George Burns, Milton Berle, Jackie Mason, Joan Rivers, Rodney Dangerfield, Mel Brooks, Alan King, Mort Sahl, Buddy Hackett, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Andy Kaufman, Richard Belzer, Jerry Seinfeld. These men and women, among others, form the canon of Jewish-American comedy. In the words of the *Detroit Jewish News*, *The Haunted Smile* "offers us a deep and subtle understanding of how Jewish culture and American openness gave birth to a new style of entertainment." Often the best way to illuminate a point is to recount some of these comedians' own brilliant routines, and Epstein uses the comedian's work to great effect, making for a book that is both a thoughtful work of history and a great deal of fun.

From *Publishers Weekly* Epstein (*A Treasury of Jewish Anecdotes*) has done yeoman work to make this enormous subject accessible. His saga includes nearly all the top-level Jewish-American comedians, from the Marx Brothers and Allen Sherman to Joan Rivers and Jerry Seinfeld. Their stories are contextualized by era: the vaudeville years of immigrant America; the rise of radio and the Borscht Belt before 1950; the "years of acceptance," when Jews entered the mainstream on TV and on stand-up stages; and "the years of triumph" for Jewish comics and filmmakers since the mid-'60s. Epstein offers keen psychoanalysis: many early successful comics had weak fathers who failed in the New World, but ambitious mothers; Mort Sahl's breakthrough suggested that "political and social needs transcended the private needs of audience members." But the book can be enjoyed simply for the funny bits resurrected in the author's mini-profiles. He includes a chapter on Jewish woman comics and an appendix on the Yiddish roots of Jewish humor. Thorough as it is, though, it ignores some contemporary standouts and understandably only touches on the Jewish contribution to situation comedy. Although Epstein speculates that Jewish comics might be able to "enhance the distinctly Jewish culture surviving in America," his definition of what makes comedy Jewish suggests that this question will linger. Seinfeld's language betrays "a distinctly urban and distinctly Jewish approach to dealing with anxiety," and the show's title made no attempt to hide his Jewish name, Epstein states, hinting that the "longstanding tension between Jewish and American identities" is partly overcome because the characters are too adolescent to choose one over the other. (Oct.) Forecast: While this title will not have readers schlepping to the bookstore in great numbers, its historical angle makes it unique, and it should do well on the Jewish circuit. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From *Booklist* Early in this entertaining book, Epstein argues that Jewish comedians have "fulfilled a special mission in American life . . . [mediating] between Jews and American culture." It is an intriguing assertion, but one Epstein never fully develops. Instead, he focuses on saying something about every major Jewish comedian to hit the big time in America, from the early days of vaudeville to last year's TV season. This makes for fascinating, if gossipy, reading. Epstein excels at digging up obscure, funny stories about famous comics. His account of the rise of the comedians who made it big on radio--George Burns, Jack Benny, and the others--is especially fascinating. His analysis of Burns and Allen's on-stage chemistry as a Jewish man and an Irish-Catholic woman who together were hilarious, and of how their on-stage personas influenced their work and success, constitutes one of the book's highlights. Those looking for a deeper meditation on the nature of comedy and Jewish identity, however, will have to go elsewhere. Jack Helbig Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "A treasure, full of wisdom and insight-and deep scholarship. Because it's about humor it has to be taken seriously." -- Frank McCourt, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis* Epstein's storytelling and his ability to provide context keep the book moving, the ideas flowing and the laughs coming." -- *Variety* "Lively and entertaining ... thoughtful and enlightening.... [A] clearly written, crisply presented chronicle of comedy." -- *Los Angeles Times* "There is a quite valuable history of much of American comedy culture...in this book." -- *The Wall Street Journal* "We knew that Jews were funny, but *The Haunted Smile* tells us why this small group has so dominated comedy." -- Alan Dershowitz, author of *Supreme Justice* and *Chutzpah*