Clown therapy sessions

Gee, am I the only one here who's laughing on the outside and the inside?

THE FAR SIDE By Gary Larson

American Studies 407                                                                                           John Ibson
Humor and American Culture                                                    Office: University Hall 419
Fall 2011                                                                               Office Hours: TR 10:15-11:15,
Code: 18216                                                                            1:00-2:00, & by appointment
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American Studies 407

John Ibson

Required reading:
Nancy Franklin, “Man Alone” (on the humor of Louis C.K.)

The Nature and Requirements of this Course:

Welcome to American Studies 407! This course examines one of those rare phenomena that seem to be found in virtually every human society, the capacity for being amused. But though amused humans appear across time and space, this class will emphasize how the exact source of amusement and the exact ways of showing amusement vary greatly, depending upon where, when, and among whom we’re considering the matter. In other words, the course assumes (though you don’t need to agree with this assumption to do well in the course) that nothing is inherently funny, indeed that something that would amuse one person or group might very well not be at all amusing to someone else. Our focus in class sessions this semester will mostly be the contemporary United States, though we’ll also give some attention to humor in our society over roughly the past half century and also to a popular form of humor in the nineteenth century, blackface minstrelsy. In your own individual research, though, you’ll be free to explore humor in any setting and time period that interest you.

I’ll lecture every now and then, but mostly our class sessions will be devoted to our talking together about the assigned reading and about material (provided by you as well as by me) that we’ll listen to and watch. Even when I lecture, I welcome your comments.

It is essential that you attend class consistently and do the reading by the day for which it’s assigned.

On September 22, when we’ve finished discussing the Morreall book, I’ll give you the topic of an essay to write outside of class, due back to me in two weeks, on October 6. An essay by an undergraduate must be at least 1,500 words long; a graduate student’s essay must be at least 2,000 words.

Additionally, you are to prepare another essay outside of class, around 1,500 words for undergraduates and 2,000 words for graduate students, in which you do one of the following:
1. Analyze in cultural terms the humor of an individual professional humorist, from the present or the past, from our society or elsewhere.
2. Analyze in an ethnography the nature and the apparent purpose of humor in a particular setting.
Both types of projects will require research beyond the assigned reading in the course. Your essay must include a bibliography listing every source you consulted, not merely the sources you cited in the essay. Whenever you actually employ one of these sources in the essay, you must cite it, in some consistent form of source citation, preferably not in parentheses. I’ll be happy to meet with you outside class to discuss topic selection and the preparation of the essay itself. No later than Thursday, **October 20**, you must have notified me in writing—in a hard copy, not by email—of the topic you’ve chosen. I’ll discuss this assignment further in class, and we’ll occasionally discuss in class how your research is progressing. The completed essay is due no later than Thursday, **November 17**.

Lastly, you’ll prepare a third essay outside of class, the **final exam**. This essay will cover the entire course, and I’ll provide the topic no later than two weeks before our last class meeting. It will be due by 7:30 pm on Thursday, **December 15**.

Please submit all written work in a hard copy, not as an attachment in email.

I will extend a due date, with no penalty, only for a genuinely serious reason, for which I might require documentation.

Working with the Office of Disabled Student Services, I will make any accommodations necessary for a **student with a disability**.

**Grading:**

I use the university’s plus-minus grading system. An A for me is a symbolic way of saying that I think your work is genuinely superior, far in excess of my minimum expectations. B is for work that is very good, definitely exceeding my minimum expectations. C is for acceptable work that meets my minimum expectations. D is for work that does not meet those expectations but that has some promise or potential for doing so. An F is for work that falls far below my minimum expectations, perhaps including (as discussed below) my expectation that work will be prepared honestly.

In evaluating your first essay and your final essay, I’ll use these criteria, in this order of importance: Understanding, originality, evidence, clarity of expression, and organization.

In evaluating your research project, I’ll consider how cleverly and precisely you’ve conceived the project, how thoroughly you’ve conducted research, and how creatively and lucidly you’ve presented your findings.

**Academic dishonesty** is an extremely serious matter: either the presentation of assigned written work actually done by someone else, without attribution, as if it were one’s own work; or else the preparation of assigned written work for a classmate.
Penalty for such deceit will range, depending on my judgment of the severity of the offense, from a failing grade on a particular assignment to failure in the course. An even more severe penalty might result should I decide to report an instance of dishonesty to the Dean of Students Office.

In determining your grade in the course, I’ll first determine your grade for written work, counting the first essay and the research project as 30% each, and the final essay as 40%. Then I’ll consider your participation in the class: your attendance; your contributions to class discussions; and, especially if you’re not a person inclined to say much in class, your discussions with me outside the classroom, in my office or in email. If your participation has been noteworthy, in either a positive way or a negative one, to determine your grade in the course I’ll then raise or lower your grade for written work up to a full letter. If your participation has not been notably bad or good, your course grade will just be the grade for your written work.

COURSE OUTLINE

8/25  What We’re Doing and Why We’re Doing It

I. MAKING IT FUNNY: HUMOR AS A CULTURAL PROCESS

1. Varieties of American Humor

9/1  Assignment: When I call on you, be amusing.

2. “Just Kidding”? Humor’s Hidden Agenda

9/8  A. Disposition, Purpose, and Meaning: Psychological, Social, and Cultural Dimensions of Humor (lecture)

What Have We Done? Interpretation of the class project (lecture)

Funny or Not? Your response to Louis C.K.

Reading: Franklin, “Man Alone” If you’re not already familiar with Louis C.K., watch some YouTube videos of him before class.

B. Laughing in the Laboratory: Investigating Humor without Killing It

Reading: Morreall, Comic Relief

9/11  Chapter 1, No Laughing Matter: The Traditional Rejection of Humor and Traditional Theories of Humor; Chapter 2, Fight or Flight—or Laughter: The Psychology of Humor; Chapter 3, From Lucy to “I Love Lucy”: The Evolution
II. THE JESTER’S JOB: MAKING A LIVING BY BEING FUNNY

Reading: Shydner, *I Killed Carlin*, Last Words

9/29 Shydner, pp. xvii-xix, 1-140.

*10/6* Shydner, pp. 141-260.

*Midterm Essay Due*


**10/20** Carlin, pp. 155-294.

** Notification of Course Project Topic Due

III. LAUGHTER AND POWER: HUMOR AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

1. A Tradition of Ridicule: American Humor and Racial Identity

Reading: Bean et al., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*


11/10  African American Humor Today: The Appeal and the Dilemma of Dave Chapelle
Videos in class: Inside The Actors Studio: Dave Chappelle; excerpts from The
Chappelle Show.

2. Women Taking Charge? Humor and the Shifting Boundaries of Gender
Reading: Rowe, The Unruly Woman

***11/17 Introduction: “Feminist Theory and the Question of Laughter,” Chapter 1,
Pig Ladies, Big Ladies, and Ladies with Big Mouths: Feminism and the
Carnivalesque,” Chapter 2, “Roseanne: The Unruly Woman as Domestic
***Course Project Due

Fall Recess

12/1 Chapter 4, Romantic Comedy and the Unruly Virgin in Classical Hollywood
Cinema,” Chapter 5, “Professor-Heroes and Brides on Top,” Chapter 6, “Dumb
Blondes,” Chapter 7, “Masculinity and Melodrama in Post-Classic Romantic

12/8 Conclusions
Course Evaluations

Final Examination, Due by 7:30 pm., Thursday, December 15.