

Book Review

Aaron Sachs (2023). *Stay cool: why dark comedy matters in the fight against climate change.* New York University Press, 176 pp.

Reviewed by **Anastasiya Fiadotava**, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia,
E-mail: anastasiya.fiadotava@folklore.ee

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In the preface to his “Engaging humor,” Elliott Oring (2003: ix) noted that “[w]hen one speaks or writes about humor, there is often an expectation that the speech or essay should itself be humorous. <...> This may have something to do with the feeling that what is formulated humorously in social interaction is discountable. <...> As a result, humor is often considered to be trivial, and it seems that serious talk about humor is regarded as participating in that triviality. A presumption exists that the consequential cannot emerge from a contemplation of the trivial.” He then continues explaining why he does not consider humor to be trivial and what significance humor can have in the communication.

While Aaron Sachs undoubtedly supports Oring’s opinion on humor as a non-trivial and important part of communication, he uses humor extensively – and skillfully – in his book. Given that the book’s central idea is to urge environmentalists to use humor, especially of a darker kind, more often, writing the book with humorous undertones is a good example of “practicing what you preach.” The book is also in many ways very personal, since Sachs draws not only on his professional experience as a historian and an environmentalist, but also on his hobbies and personal life – towards the end of the book a reader feels almost like they have just had a long conversation with an old friend.

The structure of the book also differs from more conventional academic studies and is inspired by Dante’s “Divine Comedy.” Sachs conceptualizes the current, as well as past, condition of humanity as Purgatory – something that is not quite apocalyptic (yet), but also definitely not a Paradise. He structures his book with this metaphor in mind: the three main chapters are titled “Inferno,” “Purgatory” and “Inferno II.” He also explains why the book concludes with “Inferno II” rather than “Paradise,” as was the case in the “Divine Comedy:” he dismisses the idea of Paradise as a “boondoggle” and notes that the happy end that seemed logical for Dante’s work would not work in the contemporary world that is facing decline and thus should embrace the Purgatory and abandon the hopes of eternal happiness associated with Paradise (p. xx).

In the first “Inferno” chapter the author provides a historical background of environmentalism, as well as reflects on some of its current representations. He

points at the humorlessness of many environmentalists, both real and fictional (for example, the ones represented in popular culture). On the other hand, he acknowledges that some of the early environmentalists, such as Henry David Thoreau, did have a good sense of humor and used it to advocate environmental causes (p. 6). At the same time, however, environmentalists were much keener on frightening people than on entertaining them. While terrifying can also have a positive impact on people's pro-environmental behavior, the humorlessness of environmental activists can also result in them becoming the targets of other people's humor. By bringing parallels with the Civil Rights movement in the USA, Sachs shows how self-deprecating humor can help to get the audience's sympathy, and how humorlessness can be associated with the lack of humanity (p. 30).

The "Purgatory" chapter continues and deepens historical parallels. Sachs explores the traditions of African American and Jewish humor and argues that environmentalists could make use of these traditions to promote the fight against the climate change (p. 39). He focuses on the difficult conditions that both groups had to endure and looks for the connections between these conditions and the dark sense of humor they developed. In the case of African Americans, Sachs brings the examples of trickster slave characters who manage to outwit their white landlords. Discussing the Jewish humor, the author starts from the Biblical events and suggests ironic reading of some of them. Then he also recounts how Jewish people managed to survive and keep their humor at the times of pogroms and Holocaust. Importantly, Sachs observes that much of African American and Jewish dark humor was meant for ingroup only (p. 52); however, he suggests that the idea of making fun of the difficult circumstances can be extrapolated beyond the relatively homogenous communities.

Finally, in the third chapter titled "Inferno II" Sachs brings more examples of dark humor that was created in the "dark times," including some dark environmental humor. He also acknowledges that recently "the trickle of environmental comedy in Euro-American culture has started to look more like a steady stream" (p. 75). Sachs not only describes particular examples of humorous expressions, but also their potential impact on companies' pro-environmental behavior (p. 77, cf. Zekavat and Scheel [2023: 51–52] on potential benefits and risks of environmental satire). The author specifically underscores the positive side of dark humor, especially for those who have already listened to scientists' depressing arguments on climate change (p. 80). Sachs wraps up his conclusions in the Epilogue and notes that while humor might not be a weapon to "win" the battle with climate change, it is a handy tool to cope with it and a stimulus to continue the quest for the better environment – especially for those less privileged and more affected by the climate change. Therefore, the author views humor first of all as an efficient coping mechanism (which is very relevant in the context of environmental agenda that makes a

lot of people feel depressed) and secondly, as a way to make environmentalists and their cause more relatable to general public.

By following and altering the structure of “Divine Comedy” Sachs, on the one hand, tries to make a point that the environmental problems are too grave to hope for their ultimate solution. On the other hand, his final chapter still sounds more optimistic than one could think judging by its infernal title – the author acknowledges that the environmental comedy is on the rise, and this may improve the environmentalists’ image and general public’s morale. The last chapter, thus, is still not quite Dante’s “Paradise,” but sounds more like an improved version of “Purgatory.”

The book seems to define its audience rather clearly – the author speaks to the fellow environmentalists, especially to those of them who would like to try out new ways to reach to the people. However, the book could be of interest also for a broader readership, academic and non-academic alike, who would be curious to find out more about the history of environmentalism and humor. A non-American reader (like myself) might at time get a bit lost amidst the many references to American history and popular culture, but the author explains them well enough for them to be understandable, even if not always relatable. Another problematic issue of the book is that the author avoids mentioning the studies that have shown that humor is not necessarily an asset in environmental activist (see, for example, Skurka et al. 2022) and that in certain cases humor can decrease the persuasiveness of the argument (Martin and Ford 2018: 251) which can bring damage to environmentalists. The main idea of the book – the usefulness of dark humor for the environmentalists’ agenda – might not be universally acceptable. However, the book advocates for it in a convincing and entertaining manner, and, hopefully, it would inspire not only academics, but also practitioners in the field.

References

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