**Just the Right Amount of Wrong**

***Notes of a Psychology Watcher***

**Book Review:**

Mankoff, Bob.  *How About Never. Is Never Good for You? My Life in Cartoons*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, L.L.C. 2014.

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*Haec enim ridentur vel sola vel*

*maxime quae notant et designant*

*turpitudinem aliquam non turpiter.*

*An indecency decently put is the*

*Thing we laugh at hardest.*

--- Cicero

Imagine two guys looking up at a big sign that says ***STOP AND THINK.*** One fellow says to the other: “Sorta makes you STOP AND THINK.” The reaction of these two fellows is exactly what the cartoons in *The* *New Yorker Magazine* make youdo *–* cartoons that are better described as life drawings requiring you to think about life’s predicaments and ambiguities, facing the dangers and excitements of being alive.

. Bob Mankoff, cartoon editor for *The New Yorker* (TNY)*,* has written a memoir about his life in cartoons. The topics of TNY cartoons draw on humor from sex, love, death, parenting, marriage, family, cruelty, fear, jealousy, envy, hate, identity, character, conscience, desire, mourning and more --- the same topics that psychologists are up to their ears in.

Mankoff left psychology graduate school to seek his fortune in drawing cartoons. He started selling cartoons in 1977, and started working for TNY in 1980. He says he knows all about rejection, being booted out of psychology graduate school, and submitting thousands of cartoons to TNY before getting his first cartoon published.

He became the cartoon editor in 1997, about 20 years after selling his first cartoon. As editor of the magazine, he evaluates more than 500 cartoons every week, selecting about 10 - 15 for each magazine issue

Mankoff is most famous for creating the cartoon bank, and for the following best-selling cartoon:

An executive is at his desk, on the phone, and looking at his calendar says, “No, Thursday’s out. How about never?” Is never good for you?”

His title of his memoir is taken from what might be the most popular cartoon in the history of TNY. Mankoff remembers how he got the idea for this cartoon. He was trying to get on the phone with a friend who he wanted to see. That friend kept saying, “Can we meet this time? Could we do it that time?” And finally Mankoff says to his so-called friend, “How about never? Is never good for you?”

Mankoff traces this snotty retort back to his Queens and Bronx New York Jewish background. The Chapter 1 title is: “I’m Not Arguing, I’m Jewish.” During childhood, whenever he complained to his mother he was bored, she told him to bang his head against the wall, Mankoff quips. She taught him boredom was a luxury.

He describes his never-boring cartoon editor job as evaluating humor, a much different process from enjoying humor. He gives an example of a cartoon with 10 possible captions --- and this is the format of the cartoon caption contest that runs every week in TNY. The readers submit captions to a cartoon on the page, and the winners of the caption contest are printed. His editing job consists of picking cartoons with the best captions.

To evaluate cartoons, Mankoff reports that he is faced with the paradox of choice, which automatically brings the interference of the judgment process, short-circuiting the laugh response. So instead of laughing at the cartoon, he has to judge it.

In analyzing humor, Mankoff comments about what comics call “the magic of three.” He says you need a sequence for surprise to make a narrative funny.

Here is an example of a cartoon with the element of triplets in humor --- a one, two, and then boom.

A woman is saying, “I started my vegetarianism for moral reasons, then for health concerns, and now it’s just to annoy people.”

The cartoons in TNY, show the very widespread humor taking place in New York, the circus of the world. Humor makes fun of what’s in the public mind.

Here are two examples of cartoons about same-sex marriage:

A couple is looking at TV, and the guy is saying, “Gays and lesbians are getting married. Haven’t they suffered enough?”

A couple is in bed, and the guy is saying to the woman, “What’s your opinion of some-sex marriage?”

Mankoff appreciates humor that is benign, not speaking truth to power, but humor directed back at the people who are reading the magazine.

He describes a theory of humor he calls, “Just the Right Amount of Wrong.” He says this view emphasizes that humor is different in different contexts. He says that the mother’s milk of humor is anything that’s embarrassing, guilt- or anxiety-filled. Mankoff has learned that humor comes in almost endless varieties: humor based on reality, observational humor, silliness, and playful incongruity or absurdity.

An example of an absurd cartoon is:

It’s a cowboy at a desk. The person sitting in front of him is a cow, and he’s reading his resume. And the cowboy is saying, “Very impressive. I’d like to find 5,000 more like you.”

One cartoon, apparently not for everybody’s taste, shows a rodent in a cage, and then another picture of a rodent who hung himself. The caption is: “Discouraging data on the antidepressant.” Mankoff tells about readers who send in letters saying they don’t like cartoons where animals suffer. Mankoff’s response: “We use anesthetic ink.” A wise-guy he is.

Some people are hypersensitive to humor, and some people have little or no humor. I make it a rule never to use humor with people I don’t like ---- it is hard to keep my unconscious slips from showing.

Mankoff notes there have been many cartoons in TNY about the Grim Reaper because humor is an important way we cope with death, anxiety, suffering and illness.

An example of Grim Reaper humor:

The Grim Reaper is taking away her husband, and the wife is at the apartment door, and she is saying, “Relax, Harry. Change is good.”

Cartoons about marriage are another staple of TNY cartoons. Mankoff mentions he is happily married to his third wife. He says humor is indispensable in our attempts to understand our partners and for our partners to understand us.

He cites a cartoon on marriage:

A man is talking to a woman in the living room and he says, “Believe me, Janet, I consider you an important part of our marriage.

Mankoff focuses on the links between creativity and humor. He mentions Arthur Koestler’s book, “The Act of Creation,” (1) in which he connects humor, science and art.

Life without a sense of humor is life without any sense of proportion or perspective.

Where laughter stops, so does common sense.

As William James noted, “Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing.”

**Reference:**

Koestler, Arthur. “The Act of Creation.” New York: Macmillan, 1964.