

The New York Times

DECEMBER 13, 2020

BY THE BOOK

Jerry Seinfeld Rarely Laughs While He's Reading



"It's pretty hard to laugh when you're reading — the written word is tough," says the comedian and author of "Is This Anything?" But he makes an exception for John Updike: "You know, describing the circles of water under someone's toes when they get out of the pool. That makes me laugh more than anything, that he would zero in on that."

What books are on your nightstand?

I only have one book on the nightstand at a time, because I'm a very slow reader and I really enjoy making a book last. If I'm going to bother to read a book, I don't want it to end quickly. I don't binge. I like to sip. If I like the world, I want to stay in the world. And I don't read a lot of books, honestly, but I have really turned to it during this virus time, because it's cozy and I like it better than most shows — when I watch a show, I see script pages and I see acting. Having done what I've done, I find it harder to get into. So, the book that's on my stand right now that I'm really, really enjoying is called "Four of the Three Musketeers," by Robert Bader, and it's a very, very long, detailed history of the Marx Brothers.

Do you favor long books?

No, I don't care if it's long or short. I just care that the person is a great writer, and the world is a world we want to be in. That's it. This Bader — it's a ridiculous book. I don't know what this guy was thinking that he would spend this much time and do this much work on the Marx Brothers. This is not an old book, it's from like 2016. But he did the most incredible job of research. And he's also a very good writer. And you know, to me, the history of the Marx Brothers is kind of the invention of comedy, not just as a substance but as a business. And also, if I can put this the right way: They emerged as Jews in New York City, just kind of coming out and going, "By the way, we're better at this than anybody." And ever since then you can trace — I mean, you can trace comedy obviously back to the Greeks — but in terms of what you see now, in the world, the Tigris and Euphrates to me is the Marx Brothers and vaudeville in the teens and early '20s of the last century.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

I don't like to read at night, because it puts you to sleep, which I don't like. I like to get up in the morning, and before I get dressed and leave the bedroom, I like to take the book and just spend a half-hour to start

my day. That's how I like to start the day. It's very comfortable, and you always have a lot of energy. I don't know, I just enjoy it more in the morning.

What's the last great book you read?

The Marx Brothers book is a great book. Before that, I read another book about comedy — I think I'm doing this because it gives me that feeling I'm missing, of being around. When you're in comedy, you're like a tropical fish in an aquarium, or at least I am. That's my life. If you said to a tropical fish, would you like to go anyplace else, he's going to go: You know what, I think I'd like to just stay here, I like the aquarium. So, I am a tropical fish in an aquarium. And since I can't go onstage and hang around other comedians, I read about them. So there's this other book I just found on my bookshelf — I bought it, and never read it — it's called "Seriously Funny," by Gerald Nachman. This is another incredibly well-researched history, of comedians from the '50s and '60s. They really invented the form of stand-up comedy that I do. So that's another fantastic book. It goes comedian by comedian. It's fun to just be there with Mort Sahl and Woody Allen and Dick Gregory and these guys when they were starting out.

Who are your favorite comic writers? Your favorite memoir by a comedian?

My favorite memoir is Steve Martin's "Born Standing Up." I think that's the best book about being a comedian, written by a comedian, ever done.

What books, if any, most influenced your decision to become a comic or contributed to your artistic development?

There was a book in the early '70s called "The Last Laugh," by Phil Berger. That was the first book I ever found, and I think it's the first book anybody ever did, about the world of stand-up comics.

Do you read much fiction?

When I used to read more, I really loved John Updike and John Irving. Updike, to me, was insane. I love microscopic acuity, and I thought he was untouchable in that: the fineness, and the smallness of things that he would describe so well.

What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

Definitely "The Last Laugh," but I don't think anyone has heard of these other comedy books either.

What book would you most like to see turned into a TV show or movie that hasn't already been adapted?

This Marx Brothers book, obviously, I would love. But I don't know if people would be interested. And you could never do it. You could never recreate these guys. Remember they did that Three Stooges movie? My manager, George Shapiro, says trying to get someone to act like a comedian is like trying to get them to act like a baseball player. It's almost impossible. There's so many tiny, polished movements they have that the best actors struggle to replicate. I mean, Dustin Hoffman is a wonderful actor, I love him. But he can't do stand-up. Because actors are acting. Comedians are talking to a group of people as if they are an individual. They are locked in on those people. They're not really thinking about performing. The focus is who they're talking to. There's a certain obsessed psychotic energy that all stand-ups have. It's very hard to manufacture. They're nuts. They're just nuts.

What's the last book you read that made you laugh?

I don't really laugh reading books. It's pretty hard to laugh when you're reading — the written word is tough. I mean, the Updike stuff is funny to me. You know, describing the circles of water under someone's toes when they get out of the pool. That makes me laugh more than anything, that he would zero in on that.

Are there subjects you wish more authors would write about?

No, I think everything is very well covered.

Which genres do you especially enjoy reading? And which do you avoid?

Fiction is such a high bar. You have to be such an insane writer to write fiction. If you're writing about something that really happened, you can be just OK and it's still very interesting. So historical writing is what I'm usually drawn to.

Do you have a favorite New York book?

I guess "Bonfire of the Vanities."

Do you count any books as comfort reads or guilty pleasures?

I don't feel guilt to begin with. I guess a little bit of a guilty pleasure for me was a book called "Thinking Small," about the beginning of the Volkswagen Beetle, by Andrea Hiott. She did a great job telling the story of New York advertising, the Nazis and Ferdinand Porsche colliding to create this amazing car which people take for granted because it's so common, but it was such an insanely brilliant invention as a car. I read car magazines. I guess that would be my guilty pleasure. And sometimes old Superman comics.

What's the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

The first Marx Brothers movie was "The Cocoanuts," which was originally a play that they did. And talkies had just happened, and a couple of years later Hollywood was looking around for anybody that could talk on film, and obviously grabbed the Marx Brothers. And so they made this movie. Nobody really knew how to make a movie; they just kind of shot the play, onstage. And the brothers hated it. They hated it so much, they wanted to buy it back so it wouldn't be released. Then it was a gi-monster hit and it made a fortune. That's so much fun to read, stuff like that. People do things and they hate them and the public loves them, and then they have to change their thinking on it.

How do you organize your books?

I use a bookshelf. If you stack them up, as opposed to putting them on end, you're not going to read them. Any book that's on its side, you're never going to read it. If it's up, and you can just put your fingers on the top and slide it out, you might read that one.

So you're not, like, a big Dewey decimal guy?

No. "Dewey decimal" — how *old* are you?

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

Sadly, nothing. It's comedians, cars, and I even have books about coffee. So — yeah. I have to confess that I'm so exhausted from writing that I don't want to dive into a book most days. I'm so tired of staring at pages.

Were you a big reader as a child?

No. In my 20s and 30s is the most reading I ever did. Then when the business got much more demanding and I was spending hours a day writing, that's when I stopped reading a lot. I couldn't spend half my day writing and then the other half reading. I was like, I'm going to go nuts here.

You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

Well, Updike I mentioned. I think David Halberstam would be a great dinner guest. And I'm into this Marx Brothers thing now, so I would like to sit with this guy Bader for dinner. And Lincoln! I consider him to be a great writer.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: Do you ever put a book down without finishing it?

Oh yeah. It's like stand-up. If it doesn't grab you right away and hold onto you, it's too bad, sorry.

What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?

"Born Standing Up" someone gave me. I thought that book was a great accomplishment, in the little area of interest I have.

Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?

I've been forcing a lot of comedians to read this "Seriously Funny" book, because comedians always need to be lifted up. They tend to get depressed and discouraged. It's a very discouraging profession. So when you read this book and you see the struggles of other comedians, these iconic names, you had no idea what a difficult time they had and how they actually didn't even do that well, most of them. You think of them as these great legends, and you find out they only had five or six good years and then kind of hit the skids. That's very encouraging. So, I forced a lot of comedians to get into that book. Success is not encouraging. Failure is.

What do you plan to read next?

I'm out of stuff, but along the same lines as John Updike I might give Nicholson Baker a shot.

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 13, 2020, Page 8 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Jerry Seinfeld.