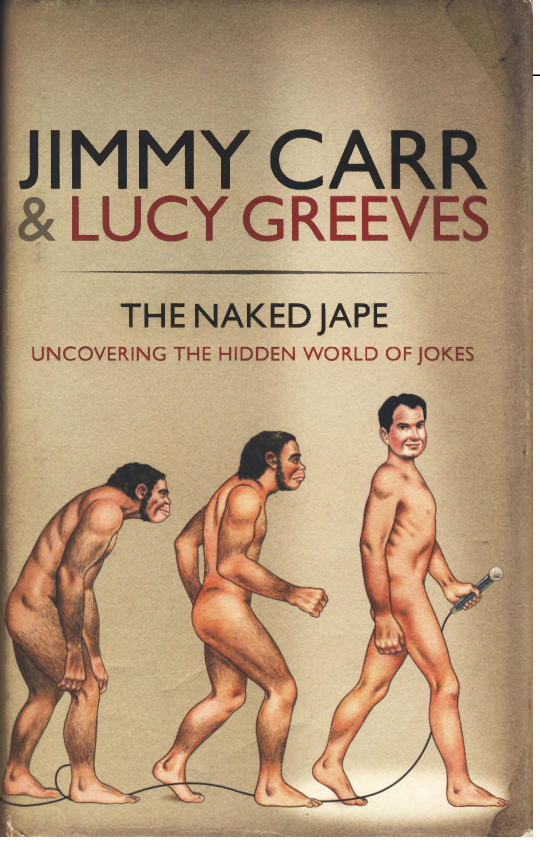
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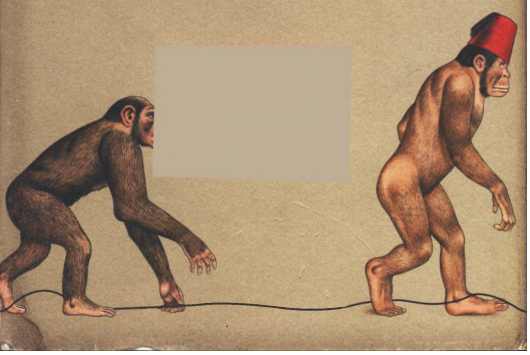

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Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves first met at university in 1992, where they bonded over a shared taste for near-the-knuckle stand-up comedy and terrible puns. In 1999, Jimmy binned a perfectly good job in marketing to see if thinking about jokes all day might be more fun. (It is.) Six years later, he persuaded his friend Lucy – by then making her living as a copywriter – to do the same.

THE NAKED JAPE is their first book together.

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WORLD OF JOKES

JIMMY CARR &
LUCY GREEVES

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For the Unknown Joker

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– x –

Preface

This is a book about jokes and the people who tell them.

Here's how it came about.

We've been best friends since we met at university in 1992, and for the past fourteen years jokes have been a constant presence in our relationship. It was Lucy who first encountered comedy in a professional capacity (we use the term loosely), selling tickets for comedy shows at the Edinburgh Festival. By the time Jimmy announced he was going to be a comedian, Lucy had long ago wearied of the late nights, breadline income and monstrous egos and got herself a proper job as a copywriter. She begged Jimmy to reconsider; nobody becomes a stand-up without losing all his money and gaining a drug problem. It's a job you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. What kind of person gets his kicks from standing, alone, facing a room full of strangers who have paid to laugh at him? We all like a joke, but liking them enough to write hundreds, then tell them over and over again, surely moves you from 'funny guy' territory into the realms of 'pathological obsessive'. Despite the fact that he was quite good at the whole joke thing, she knew it would end in tears . . .

Unfortunately, Jimmy's subsequent comedy career dealt something of a blow to Lucy's reputation as a trend-spotter. But we're still friends. We're a bit busier now than we were in those happy days of student grants and eight-week terms, but underneath we haven't changed a bit. Some people let fame go to their heads. They get all puffed up and start talking about themselves in the third person. Jimmy Carr would never let that happen to him.

Honestly, he wouldn't.

However, when we decided to write a book together, talking about ourselves in the third person became unavoidable. Our individual identities had to be submerged in a pool of 'we'. Don't be fooled by our apparent unanimity, though. It conceals a number of bitter differences of opinion. For example, Jimmy thinks that pun about 'a pool of "we"' is really, really poor and potentially damaging to his professional reputation; it makes Lucy snort with laughter. But on the whole, we found ourselves in agreement. Let's just say that after fourteen years of terrible puns, you know when to compromise.

We may not always agree about what's funny, but we both understand that jokes matter. It's easy for people to dismiss jokes as trifling and insignificant because they are designed to be laughable, because they are such short, sharp shots of pure entertainment. In fact, although a joke on the page is a fairly straightforward proposition, as soon as it gets out into the open it's quite a different matter. The context in which the joke is heard can change it from an innocent riddle to a complex, coded social message, one that is usually ambivalent and open to a range of interpretations. The act of telling a joke can be profoundly serious.

Fortunately, this book is not. Despite Jimmy's professional interest in jokes, and Lucy's tendency to take *everything* slightly too seriously, we wrote this book as enthusiasts, not academics. It's unapologetically personal, and it's steeped in the kind of humour that we love. There are almost as many theories about humour as there are theorists – one scholar alone identifies eighty different 'theories of laughter'.* We didn't think anyone needed another one. Good jokes, on the other hand, you can never have too many of. So this book isn't just about jokes, it's a joke book too.

We've scoured the widest possible range of sources to bring you more than 450 of the best jokes we could find. Some of them are by Jimmy – but not as many as there would have been

* Readers intent on counting them may turn to Edmund Bergler's 1956 book *Laughter and the Sense of Humour.*

if he had written this book on his own.* Some are genuinely ancient – 1,500 years old in one case – others are the latest gems from some of our favourite modern comedians. Where possible, we have credited jokes to their original author. But the genealogy of a joke doesn't always work that way, so many remain anonymous. (If you are a comic and find a joke here that you are sure is yours, please let us know via the publishers.)

Many of these jokes may be familiar, like old friends who aren't quite as funny as you used to think they were. Others will certainly make you groan. A few may offend you. But we hope that many more of them will surprise and delight you. They'll tickle some mysterious neural circuit, triggering a visceral response that makes you laugh out loud and store them up to retell to your friends. That's the hit all of us joke-junkies are looking for.

* All of them. Probably.

The reason angels can fly is that they take themselves lightly.
G. K. Chesterton

CHAPTER 1
Joking Matters

In which we clamber atop our rudimentary soapbox, clear our throat and prepare to address the assembled reader

As far as we're concerned, there are three enduring mysteries of human existence: sex, death and jokes.

Frankly, the first two have been over-analysed – Plato and de Botton have it pretty much sewn up between them, it would seem – so for the purposes of this book let's concentrate on the jokes. Because jokes are just fascinating, once you start to turn them around and look at them from different angles. Just about everyone that we've ever met knows at least one joke. Admittedly in a large number of cases it transpires that they know the set-up from one joke and the punchline from a completely different one, but that's another story. Jokes spread around the world and embed themselves in our shared culture; the most resonant of them get lodged in the language in the same way that clichés or old wives' tales do. Why do we store them and recall them, these tiny folktales, these wonderful lies? Why is there a constant demand for fresh ones, while the old ones survive for centuries? Why *did* the chicken cross the road?

A joke, for the purposes of this book, is defined primarily as something you say deliberately to evoke amusement. It's a thing of words, a unit of communication. Not simply slapstick, not just storytelling, not mere wordplay – although it undoubtedly can contain elements of all of these. It's a formulaic verbal construction designed to elicit a response – laughter. Beyond that, it gets a bit more complicated. A joke usually revels in its brevity, getting its business done in few words, whether it's a 'one-liner', a riddle, a pun or a very short story; yet quite often we also recognize as a joke quite a long story with very little point, which may or may not involve a hirsute canine. A joke will usually incorporate a set-up and a punchline – in fact, the punchline

I may be middle-class, but I'm hard. *Al dente*, you might say.
Jimmy Carr

might be said to be the defining feature of a joke – but not always: for example, the kind of 'in-joke' where so much is implied by the teller, and understood by the listener, that the set-up or the punchline can go unspoken; or the aforementioned shaggy dog story, where what we laugh at is the last line's lack of punch. A joke might bear a close resemblance to its backward first cousin, the practical joke, which ends in a physical pay-off rather than a verbal punchline. It doesn't have to be told by a professional comedian, or heard in a comedy club. A good joke is footloose; it takes on a life of its own as it passes from person to person, through playground, pub and email in-box.

Jokes rightly belong to an oral culture: they live out loud, not on the page. Anyone who tries to capture and analyse these elusive little stories treads a fine line. On the one hand, the moment you take a joke out of context and start to unpick its meaning or its cultural significance, you risk losing the 'funny'. It's like dismantling a football into a sad little heap of its component parts – leather, catgut, wadding, rubber, air – then trying to hoof it into the goal. On the other hand, jokes do carry more complex and subtle significance than we sometimes allow them, and a heightened appreciation of the craft that goes into them, the history of their origins and uses and a certain curiosity about why they matter makes us appreciate even more keenly the magic moment when a well-struck joke hits the back of the net.

But let's try not to get too po-faced about it: jokes, by definition, are not to be taken seriously. We brush off their effects by saying, 'It's just a joke,' or 'I'm only joking.' We dismiss individuals we don't respect in the same way: 'He's a total joke.' When telling jokes, we agree that they are best delivered lightly, off-the-cuff – however much effort may go into this appearance of levity. And that's the extraordinary thing about jokes, really: trivial as we insist they are, still we treasure them. We commit

I rang up a local builder and said, 'I want a skip outside my house.'
He said, 'I'm not stopping you.'
Tim Vine

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