Book Review

Claire Schmidt. 2017. *If You Don't Laugh You'll Cry: The Occupational Humor of White Wisconsin Prison Workers*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. viii + 269pp. ISBN: 9780299313500.

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Claire Schmidt's *If You Don't Laugh You'll Cry* has lain on my shelf for a year or two now; I have read it, taught from it, plundered its works cited for new readings, but had yet to sit down and try to encompass it into a review. In part the book's great strength is also the reviewer's great challenge: it bestrides a study of humor, an occupational folklife study, and a reflection on family folklore. The two former are reflected in the subtitle, *The Occupational Humor of White Wisconsin Prison Workers*, which also introduces the regional and ethnic contexts of the performances under discussion. What gives the book its great import, however, is the third, insider, familial context.

Schmidt comes from a family that has worked for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections for three generations, beginning with the grandfathers on both sides. In her conclusion she hints at the book's genesis: "I think what I really intended, underneath it all, was to show off how funny and wise my grandfathers were. I wanted to introduce my family and friends to the world, so that the world could start thinking a little bit harder about what it means to work in a prison at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (p. 206). This "thinking harder" requires the reader to push back – or through – the stigma associated with the profession in popular and vernacular culture, a stigma that prison workers know all too well. How does a family participate in the joyfulness of humor and laughter in a context that, as Schmidt grew to realize over time, operates within cycles of racism and white supremacy, sexism and misogyny (and arguably misandry), homophobia, and class conflict, all of which are inherently interwoven in the American industrial prison complex? Are they, as it were, bad people? Is the only appropriate response unlaughter, and everything less a personal failing? Schmidt assures us to the contrary, and over the course of the book she makes that compelling and ultimately convincing argument.

The book is broken into three untitled parts, each in turn comprising three chapters. Part 1 sets the parameters of the blurry lines between occupational and family lore. Occupations and families are often intertwined – police, civil servants,

plumbers may all be family traditions — and the rhythms and worldview of the workplace resonate in the rhythms and worldview of the home. But once the stigmatized threshold of prison worker is crossed, especially in smaller communities where a prison might be a desirable employer if only from lack of alternatives, the performances that arise to accommodate this anomaly with the flows and celebrations of American life, and which were so normal to Schmidt as a child, are in retrospect peculiar. Prison workers cannot erase their identity when they cross back over the family threshold, but they do not need to — nor ought they to — share with their loved ones all that happens within the prison walls. The family lore of prison workers builds a vision of the job rendered suitable for home consumption, creatively drawing from popular and vernacular culture, the general expectations of domestic verbal and celebratory art, and actual work experiences.

The first and third chapters emphasise the family's proximity to but also distance from the reality of the prison. Nestled in between is a chapter boldly titled "Does Prison Make You Racist?", which frames the prison as a zone where strangers are in intimate contact under the worst of circumstances, leading almost inevitably to othering processes that categorize the prisoners by racial or sexual/gender identity — over and above, but expressly never excluding, the identity of 'prisoner.' The penal system is organized along such categories, and prisoners themselves tend to self-select and essentialize the communities they form within the prison walls. As befits a book on humor, Schmidt's work shows that when joking about work experiences categorization allows prison workers to tap into the extant body of esoteric and exoteric lore to better communicate their constructed identity to their family.

Part 2 takes us away from the family and into the prison, to consider "how humor makes prison work itself possible—how humor upholds and maintains actual institutions as well as more abstract social institutions" (p. 78). As a means of alleviating the excruciating tedium of much of prison work, as a means of inducting new members through pranks and story, and as a means of building relationships (and defusing tensions) with the inmates, humor's functions are self-evident. But this section is not purely functionalist: it is rooted far more in the occupational folklife of Robert McCarl, where the performative culture of a workplace, whether humorous or maudlin, is based in large part on and serves to communicate what comprises a good worker. 'A good worker' and 'a good employee' are not coterminous, and the respect accorded a peer is often precisely associated with those times when they put themselves in jeopardy with management for what would collectively be understood by workers as the greater good, including times when an opportunity for humor, irrespective of managerial wrath, was too good to let pass.

Part 3 turns this functionalist argument on its head: although humor can be a lubricant to make the machine of the prison run more smoothly and build a better team and, arguably, a kinder workplace, it can also be used to undermine the workplace, to be a form of protest, and to reaffirm the individual as something of an iconoclast and not a typical prison worker, insofar as such a thing even exists. Throughout the book Schmidt emphasizes that a constant in occupational folklife is how no worker thinks of themselves as typical: “[Being] able to work successfully in corrections requires the ability to both identify as an insider but also to reject the occupation and see oneself as separate, atypical, or unique. This ambiguity arises in part from the fraught reasons for choosing a career in corrections but also from the moral and ethical complexity of doing the job” (p. 129). In addition to negotiating the complex identity of prison worker, individuals find themselves filling a necessary role in the system as it currently stands with little power to challenge or change that system, especially in economically contingent contemporary rural Wisconsin, where, as everywhere, there is a tension between the pragmatics of providing for one’s family within capitalism and living wholly according to one’s conscience (and where the former Governor, Scott Walker, explicitly singled out prison workers as an example of the worst of the civil service on his path to eviscerating unions and the state budget). So, a job not necessarily worth doing is not necessarily worth doing well, and ambivalence towards one’s chosen career manifests in a number of ways, one of the least damaging of which is humor.

Schmidt is not the most dynamic prose stylist, but as I worked my way through, I began to suspect it might be intentional: as she grapples with the difficult subject matter nothing florid or louche distracts the reader. This book is devoted to a serious and sometimes grim subject, and she treats it as such. That is also what makes some aspects delightful: as she recounts familial narratives of infamous killers like Wisconsin inmates Ed Gein and Jeffrey Dahmer, or parses the role of a ‘dick-sock’ in a practical joke anecdote, the lack of ornamentation in her language turns her into the ultimate straight man.

As the subject matter is something the student likely imagines they understand yet is utterly different from expectations, this book works well in the classroom. The chapters are discrete enough that one can be pulled for stand-alone use (I assigned Chapter 5, “Transforming Outsiders Into Insiders,” as an illustrative reading for the occupational folklife section of an introductory course), but the book works best as a whole. It would be an effective text in obvious places such as occupational folklife, family lore, and humor, but also in courses on race in America and personal experience narrative. This is an excellent book, however rough the read.