The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy examines all the ways that stand-up comedians have been dogged by the assertion that their craft is a dark one; that is, either the comedians are plagued by traumatic (usually personal) histories or that the comedians themselves are drawn into the dark world of stand-up with all its attendant problems (sexual harassment, mental illness, politically incorrect politics, lack of decorum, etc.). According to such beliefs, comedians are attracted to the stage because of either a fatal flaw or a compulsion “to tell the truth regardless of the consequences” (14). The former trait was established in ancient texts, such as Socrates’ formulation of “divine inspiration,” and continues to resonate in popular myths in the present, while the latter draws inspiration from figures like Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl who provided the template for the countercultural influence that stand-up would embrace in the 1960s.

As Patrice A. Oppliger and Eric Shouse tell us in their introduction, the impact of an early figure like Bruce both shaped comedians’ performances thereafter and cultivated the audiences’ puerile interest in “specifics of the performer’s daily lives off stage,” (Daube 2012, p. 60 cited p. 12). In addition, the association with the counterculture emphasized a “nihilistic sensibility” (p. 12) that continues to influence the darkness of contemporary performers.

The introduction is well-organized and highlights the contributions to the volume using a “map of darkness” composed by Spitzberg and Cupach (1998) in The Dark Side of Close Relationships, which include dysfunctional or destructive parts of human action that hinder the ability to function, behaviors that violate social norms, “exploitation of the innocent,” that comprises early life trauma or violation, lack of fulfillment in life, the abject parts of comedy such as self-mockery or punching down, and “objectification” to which they emphasize the recent scandals of the #MeToo and the ethics of rape jokes.

If one were to sum up the charge the editors and contributors have taken up in this volume it might be this: to compose a genealogy of stand-up’s relation to darkness in the context of American culture’s post-1960s obsession with trauma and the showcasing of pain for audience entertainment. A second feature is the way that edited collection hints at but does not directly take on “wokeness.” Instead, this academic volume is an attempt to explain why stand-up is at odds with politically
correct culture and why comedians so often need to bump up against controversy to be successful. An alternative (Lacanian) subtitle for the volume could be: What Do Audiences Want?

The first chapter by Shouse opens the first section “Darkness from the Outside” with an examination of the public and private lives of George Carlin, Richard Pryor, and Robin Williams, who are described as “tragicomic figures” impacted by death, drug addiction and suicide. The next chapter features an in-depth look at George Carlin’s retraction and later reintroduction of a bit titled “I Kinda Like It When a Lotta People Die,” following the 9–11 event. This is followed by an exceptionally good chapter on Steve Martin, where his “moronic” comedy is described as a form of revenge on his father who never took his career seriously: “Whether consciously intentional or not, the decision to play an inept entertainer likely gave Martin a vengeful form of satisfaction,” (p. 74).

Other chapters in this section include one that addresses addiction, humor and Craig Ferguson’s legacy as a recovered addict who simultaneously ridicules and protects vulnerable subjects of celebrity culture. Another chapter examines a court case in Quebec where comedian Mike Ward was accused of discriminating against a popular physically disabled singer and lost. This discussion explores the “moral boundaries” of jokes that might be made about the disabled focusing on parodies of public caricature versus direct discrimination. This is then followed by a chapter featuring Jim Gaffigan and the relationship between food action and comedy, as well as the focus on the ethics of comedy related to fatness. “Comedy in the Era of #MeToo” examines and assesses accusations against Bill Cosby, Louis C.K. Aziz Ansari and Al Franken focusing on how audiences and close-knit comedians are unable to process the accusations against a beloved comedian who represents, oddly, a critique of the very things they are accused of in their personal lives. The last chapter in this long section highlights an often-unmentioned comic in the humor literature, Maria Bamford, with an exploration of how she started out as an “alt comic” before becoming a “national spokesperson for the mentally ill” (p. 174).

The title of the second section, “Darkness from the Inside,” was, for this reviewer, initially misleading. On reflection, I thought the titles of the sections might make more sense reversed, since the first two-thirds of the book address how (mostly famous) comedians have worked through agonizing experiences through their comedy. In contrast, the last third of the book deals with violence, and how comedians deal with it in their life and their job on stage. It is a deep portion of the book that is very compelling and might need a trigger warning (did I miss it?).

In the first chapter of this section, Shouse gives an overview of the kinds of stand-up experiences and patrons that are most likely to lead to physical violence and relentless heckling. Alcohol is an obvious contributor, as it is for sports. Another precipitant to violence is when an audience member feels directly threatened by the
comedy (university professors and teachers know this unfortunate turn of events very well). Finally, Shouse details some types of audiences that may be more prone to violence: mobsters, hockey players, Neo Nazi skinheads, gang members, bikers, armed First Nations people. Shouse calls only the skinheads a subculture, but I would argue that all are, whether by choice or not. None of these groups feels part of so-called civil society or the status quo. In a sense, they are all lumpen, as Marx described it, and part of subcultures as defined by Chicago School of Sociology in that they have no stake in a common culture (except for maybe the hockey players, and they perhaps are explained by alcohol).

The next chapter outlines the vicissitudes of a comic stage persona (CSP) that a comic builds through repetition and engagement with audiences. Eventually the comic learns and lets the audience interaction frame their comedic persona in a way that guarantees what they ultimately desire, which is not truth, but laughter. The following chapter is a first-person narration by a woman comic who is sexually assaulted after a show by the heckler who ruined it, “Drunky McCreepster.” This narration is followed by an analysis that underscores how the kinds of responses the comic had to the perpetrator were a kind of micro-resistance, as described by Michel de Certeau. The next chapter is, again, a first-person narration of how a woman comic does an ethical presentation of rape jokes after being a sexual assault victim herself, and then being re-traumatized by the justice system in Ohio. As she writes, “I am the tour guide to my own trauma” (p. 279) and explains that the ethical way to tell rape jokes is to “separate the suffering from the absurdity,” (p. 282). This means educating the audience away from their stereotypes and definitions of rape victims and “ridiculing your oppressors,” (pp. 283–284). Finally, “if the joke contributes to a violent society that degrades a subset of people or dismisses human rights, it’s not ethical, and more than likely, not funny,” (p. 286). Like the previous chapter, this one is also analyzed for its comedy-therapy connection.

The last two chapters are again first-person narratives but this time they are about the work comics do to make it to shows: that is, the time and effort required to make stand-up possible. In “Picking Up the Dead,” the narrator describes doing the work of picking up corpses. In it, he recounts the particularly harrowing experience of picking up a young woman who died of an overdose and probably was gone for at least three months before the police were alerted. This discussion demonstrates the work comedians take on to be able to make it to a ten-minute stand-up gig by drawing on the “myth of Sisyphus” to contextualize and bring meaning to another dark side of the craft. The last narrative describes how much time is lost in preparing for gigs and working to survive to be available for a stand-up life. Again, reflection provides context and interpretive meaning to the story. The contributions to this second section are strong.
The cover of the book, at first glance, is a still shot from *Gaslit* (2022). Once I read the book, I realized it probably gestures towards Oppliger’s use of a Sarah Silverman quote in her section reflecting on the ethics of rape. Silverman was quoting her therapist who said, “darkness can’t exist in the light” (p. 291). This volume goes a long way to bring that light to the variety of experiences that make up stand-up comedy. This was a long-needed and much-awaited volume. The editors have put in a lot of work here to organize an effective and affective reading experience. All contributions are necessary and well executed.