The main title of this book is based on the punchline of an old Jewish joke: “Funny, you don’t look Jewish.” I am not exactly sure what the parodic title implies; possibly that being Jewish and humor are so intertwined that one can be easily substituted for the other. The book’s thesis is fairly straightforward. Four generations of American writers and comics—the Silent Generation (born 1925–1945), the Baby Boom Generation (b. 1946–1965), Generation X (b. 1966–1979) and the Millennials (b. 1980–1995)—display different attitudes towards Judaism and the Jewish people in their work. While acknowledging that these generational categories are “useful fictions,” Jennifer Caplan seems pretty certain that if you call a Gen X born in 1979 a Millennial, “she will likely correct you in no uncertain terms and remind you that she is Gen X” (2–3). If generational self-identity on the part of the latter two generations is that discriminating and fastidious, one would think that these generational categories might be something more than useful fictions.

Caplan proffers as exempla of the Silent Generation’s humor Woody Allen’s “Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar” and “The Scrolls”; Joseph Heller’s novel God Knows; Philip Roth’s short story “Eli the Fanatic; and Bernard Malamud’s “The Jewbird.” Baby Boomer humor includes a couple of Saturday Night Live (SNL) episodes and some episodes from the widely popular comedy series Seinfeld (a couple of which focus on ritual circumcision including one that is a parody of a 1972 Mercury Marquis advertisement that I am not sure Caplan has recognized). Gen X humor is represented by Jennifer Wesfeldt’s film Kissing Jessica Stein, Jonathan Tropper’s novel This Is Where I Leave You, “Sister Hills” from Nathan Englander’s short story collection What We Talk about When We Talk about Ann Frank, the Coen Brothers’ films The Big Lebowski and A Serious Man, and Larry David’s television series Curb Your Enthusiasm. The series Broad City, Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, and @CrazyJewishMom serve as the sample for Millennial humor.

The Silent Generation supposedly was antithetical to religion and consequently ridiculed Jewish texts, beliefs, and ritual practices. At the same time, they were critical of the American Jewish community’s rejection of European refugees who were devoted to those same texts and practices but who threatened the status of American Jews and their identity as Americans. The Baby Boomers, according to
Caplan, followed in the Silent Generation’s footsteps and continued to see ritual Judaism as a threat but later on began to see it more like Gen X who found value in ritual’s ability to ground the American Jewish family. In other words, they recognized the sociological and psychological value of religion but not its spiritual, moral, or philosophical worth.

While I was familiar with much, although not all, of the material cited for the first three generations, I had to look up the examples for the Millennials (I confess I could only tolerate one full episode of Crazy Ex-Girlfriend, but I did manage several of Broad City). The characters are comfortable in their Jewish identities, but it is not clear that these identities have any religious, spiritual, or even sociological depth. Caplan contends that the characters regarded their Jewish identity as “cool” (p. 130), but there does not seem to be anything substantive underlying that identity to be cool about. It demands nothing but the assumption of the label, which may be why Caplan says that she doesn’t quite know what to make of Millennial comedy.

Caplan maintains that the Jewish comedy through these generations tracks a change in American Jews and their idea of Jewishness and a change in their identification with American culture. “There is a change from prioritizing Jewish peoplehood to protecting Judaism” (p. 3). As they became “more attached to their secular American identities, the more interested they became “in normalizing Jewish ritual practice and individual Jewish identities” (p. 4). I am not sure what “protecting Judaism” means exactly, and “normalizing ritual practice” also seems fuzzy. Protect and normalize how? Protect from and for whom?

Judaism generally refers to a set of beliefs and practices that stem from the Bible, the Talmud, and later rabbinic interpretations. The sense of a Jewish peoplehood, and the sense of a common identity would seem to be something else. While eating bagels and lox for Sunday brunch, enjoying jokes and comedy, or playing the Chinese game of mahjong can reference American Jews as an ethnicity and even serve as markers of Jewish identity, it seems a stretch to think of these activities as part of Judaism. Caplan is aware of the difference between Judaism and “Jewishness,” the latter having no necessary religious connotations at all, so I am somewhat puzzled by the use of “Judaism” in the subtitle of the book.

Caplan states that she has no definition of “Jewish humor,” and, in fact, is hopeful that her work will contribute to the formulation of such a definition. Nevertheless, her operating principle is to examine the relationship between humor created by Jews, Jewish practices, and the sense of Jewishness (p. 2). That is pretty much a definition of Jewish humor proposed by a number of scholars and popular writers over the years. So, Caplan is working with a definition of Jewish humor whether she chooses to recognize it or not. What she is not working with is a theory of humor. At a very few points along the way, she cites Thomas Hobbes (p. 79), Sigmund Freud (p. 75), D. H. Monro, and benign violation theory (p. 79), but the references to these
theories and theorists are wafer-thin and are invoked only in relation to very minor points about some particular comic elements. None of these perspectives is ever applied to reckon what might be going on with humor more broadly.

While the proposition that different generations in a rapidly changing society are likely to view the world differently seems reasonable and worth exploring, whether the particular trajectory that Caplan outlines for American-Jewish humor will prove convincing ultimately depends on the nature and quality of the evidence. What struck me was that despite the use of two funny's and one humor in the book's title, a couple of the pieces analyzed were decidedly not funny. Anyone who asks about Philip Roth's humorous writing about Jews would most likely be pointed to his novel Portnoy's Complaint. His “Eli the Fanatic” is a short story that is not funny and probably was never intended to be. While the exchange of clothing that is the central feature of the story is often a technique employed in farce—from the Romans to Mozart operas to the film Mrs. Doubtfire—there is nothing farcical about this exchange in “Eli the Fanatic.” With the introduction of this story into the data set, readers become aware that Caplan means to study not merely humor but satire. Satire is critical and judgmental. It targets society or some segment of it, but such work may arise from feelings of anger and indignation or from bemusement. The latter motive is likely to engender the employment of humor, the former much less so. If “Eli the Fanatic” is satire, it is not of the bemused sort. Nor is Englander's story “Sister Hills.” In fact, one critic called this story a “heart flipping horror story.” I never read Tropper's novel This is Where I Leave You, but Caplan’s description does not suggest that it is humorous either.

Woody Allen's work is decidedly of the bemused sort, and the standard target of his comedy is his own neurotic and plainly New York Jewish persona. He regularly employs stereotypical Jewish names, Yiddish terms, references to Hitler, the Nazis, and the Holocaust, but few of his creations are directed at Jewish texts or practices. “Hassidic Tales” and “The Scrolls” are exceptions. In the first, he lampoons Hassidic tales of wisdom, saintliness, and wonder—such as those published by Martin Buber—but they are one with Allen's lampoons of psychiatrists, historians, memoirists, gourmets, and a host of other scholars, experts, and intellectuals. While Allen manages to convey that he is not a believer in Hassidic wisdom or miracle tales (nor is he captivated by the claims of any religious tradition), he is not disdainful of them either. “The Scrolls” is a take-off on the narrative of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls. “The Scrolls” contains three Bible-like stories in which God is portrayed as either a practical joker or an expert on men's fashion design. Encounters with God are more like exchanges with a long-time friend or business partner rather than with a divine being. Allen is working somewhat like Joseph Heller in God Knows as Caplan contends. Allen's humor is often absurdist and never sardonic. His argument is with God, any God, not with Judaism per se. Malamud’s “The Jewbird” is a comic fable and
would seem to express the same kind of criticism of American Jewry as Roth’s “Eli the Fanatic,” but why did Caplan choose “The Jewbird” rather than, for example, “Angel Levine” which might convey a very different perspective and mood?

One of the questions that naturally arises is the extent to which Caplan’s generational categories hold water. Although she warned that these categories are somewhat “fictional,” they are presented as the basis for a claim of a set of regular transformations of Jewish humor in the United States. So why is Bernard Malamud included in the Silent Generation since he was born in 1914, long before the beginning of that generation in 1925. And if Malamud is included, why not Leo Rosten (b. 1908) and his *The Education of H*y*m*a*n K*a*p*l*a*n*? Conversely, David Steinberg (b. 1942) produced *Incredible Shrinking God*, a record album of mock sermons on biblical figures that would have supported Caplan’s thesis better than either Roth’s or Malamud’s stories. The same might be said for Neil Simon’s (b. 1927) *God’s Favorite*. Larry David (b. 1947) and the Coen brothers (b. 1954 and 1957) are included by Caplan with the Gen Xers having broken away from the Baby Boomers to follow “the Gen X lead” (p. 87). These kinds of omissions and shifts suggest that Caplan’s generational categories might in part be constructed from her thesis rather than the thesis emerging from the generational categories. Ultimately the readers of this book will have to decide how representative Caplan’s examples are. This would be difficult without a broad knowledge of American-Jewish humor and some understanding of her selection procedure. Which humorists and which works were rejected and why? After all, one can maintain any thesis if one is allowed to selectively choose the materials that illustrate it.

There are some odd sociological assertions at the close of the book. For example, the Silent Generation who lived through World War II fought against organized religion and its hypocrisy as “religion had nearly been the death of the Jewish people” (p. 137). The Nazis, however, were bent upon eliminating what they considered a race, not a religion. The Jews murdered in Europe included those who knew little of Jewish religious belief or practice, some that had converted to Christianity, and some that didn’t even know that they were Jews until it was too late. “Generation X grew up in … a darker, scarier, more corporate age …. AIDS and crack and heroin and a myriad of other social ills led the members of Generation X to see society without religion as a society without cohesion …. They came back, if not to belief … to the way that religion can serve as a port in an emotional storm” (p. 137). Were the times any darker for Gen X than for the Silent Generation who had to contend with a world war and its aftermath, or the Baby Boom generation that had to contend with polio, the Vietnam War, and the very real possibility of nuclear destruction?

Caplan “strongly resists” regarding the progression in the humor as an index of Jewish assimilation (pp. 6–7). Yet, there is much to suggest a weakening of Jewish practice, Jewish knowledge, and even the knowledge of Jewish practice in favor of
trying to look like other Americans while retaining—for the moment at least—a Jewish name tag. Her claim that she can track the changes in American Jewish humor and account for these changes in terms of continuities and reactions to the previous generation and changes in the sociology of the American Jewish community needs to be taken with more than a few grains of salt. Although the question of generational humor might prove a profitable one, the erratic choices of humor and humorists, the lack of justifications for inclusion and exclusion, and the absence of any theory of humor should make the reader pause before accepting the historical scheme that is being proposed.