



A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture

Nancy A. Walker

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"It is a very serious thing to be a funny woman." –Frances Miriam Berry Whitcher

A Very Serious Thing is the first book-length study of a part of American literature that has been consistently neglected by scholars and underrepresented in anthologies—American women's humorous writing. Nancy Walker proposes that the American humorous tradition to be redefined to include women's humor as well as men's, because, contrary to popular opinion, women do have a sense of humor.

Her book draws on history, sociology, anthropology, literature, and psychology to posit that the reasons for neglect of women's humorous expression are rooted in a male-dominated culture that has officially denied women the freedom and self-confidence essential to the humorist. Rather than a study of individual writers, the book is an exploration of relationships between cultural realities—including expectations of "true womanhood"—and women's humorous response to those realities.

Humorous expression, Walker maintains, is at odds with the culturally sanctioned ideal of the "lady," and much of women's humor seems to accept, while actually denying, this ideal. In fact, most of American women's humorous writing has been a feminist critique of American culture and its attitudes toward women, according to the author.

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