

Humour again

Elizabeth Percival's contention that surprise is an essential ingredient of humor (Letter, COGITO 4, 1) is just an old chestnut that needs to be expunged from our laughterlore.

Examples counter to Percival's view are familiar and obvious. First, there are those who laugh at their own jokes, sometimes to the extent of being unable to finish telling them; such people are definitely not surprised by the joke's humorous development or its outcome. Also, it is not uncommon for people to re-read humorous writings or watch re-runs of TV sitcoms in full anticipation of various funny parts without thereby diminishing the humorous effect. Finally, there are the so-called standing jokes or running gags, which achieve their effect through repetition and expectation rather than surprise. A character's words and deeds are often funny precisely because they are so typical and so predictable; witness Charlie Chaplin's idiosyncratic walk, Dagwood Bumstead's collisions with the mailman, and Jack Benny's mock-reproachfully intoned 'Well!'.

Surprise is but one of many avenues to humor.

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