

opinion

GUEST COLUMNIST - HELEN LEDERER

I relish the feeling of what real laughter does for me



On a weekend away to Fez in Morocco a few years ago, I was struck by two whirling dervishes who had kindly agreed to come and whirl in my hotel. Although the practice was not originally intended as entertainment, the custom is still seen as a tourist attraction. Behind it is the ability to induce a state of altered consciousness and I, for one, am right behind that intent and that ability.

My version of this practice is laughing. And, like the act of whirling, it requires no ego, no performance, no competitiveness – just a willingness to worship the god of laughter.

Luckily, I can still remember my first laugh, which offers up a good benchmark. It was one of those really big laughs that forced me off the sofa and on to the carpet. I was in heaven – a parallel universe in which I struggled to breathe and the world stood still for one glorious glimpse of bliss and hysteria.

The reason? Someone had just said the word “bum” on camera. I know. I was beside myself. Didn't they know that the word “bum” was possibly the most funny and rude banned word ever spoken? I laughed until I cried. My mother had to hurry in and say: “Look what you've done now, you've spilt your milk.” Which was true, I had. On the plus side, I hadn't urinated. Or died.

Ever since, I've been chasing that moment. The moment of surrender to getting that out-of-body state of hysteria, bliss and connection. A place of safety where the present world is shut out and a better world takes over.

But you can't fake it. You just can't. The moment someone starts telling me a joke, I normally start to feel quite lonely. Am I alone at having to react to the tyranny of someone else's imposed punchline? Laughter should unite. But because I have issues with authority



and being a people-pleaser from the 80s and before #MeToo, I have to allow for the fact that I will normally fake a polite response, especially if the joke teller is an agent and paying for my salad.

Nowadays, this occasional glitch on my path to laughter has only helped me relish what the feeling of real laughter does for me. I've had time to work out what works. The best scenario for me is spotting someone falling over and then pretending they haven't. This is my ideal. But because this can only work, at its best, a few times, it's not realistic to rely on that.

After that, it's reading funny books by women writers. Because while a clever joke is satisfying, it can be a tad patronising if it takes a second to see its genesis and feel included.

So, my money is on laughing at the breadth of wittily mundane, surreally ridiculous narratives penned by women writers and performers.

Open the pages of any Muriel Spark

and get reassured by her waspish ironic narration that's as hard-hitting today as it ever was. “Remember not to think about the reading public. It will put you off.”

Relish the absurdity of Caitlin Moran in *How to Be a Woman*, written over a decade ago. “If I injure myself, and end up in a very formal hospital where they don't allow slang words and they ask ‘where is the pain?’, I think that rather than say ‘in my vagina’ I would just reply ‘guess’ and then faint.”

Carrie Fisher's *Wishful Drinking* is still one of the most bold and original pleasures out there. “I now get awards all the time for being mentally ill. I'm apparently very good at it and am honoured for it regularly. Probably one of the reasons is that there's no swimsuit portion of the competition.”

Women have been writing funny forever and since the debate about women being funny is so old and frayed, it's best not to go there.

Dervishes whirl to induce a state of altered consciousness – a bit like laughter
HAKAN AKGUN/SOPA

It staggers me that we don't celebrate laughter more

All funny authors are to be relished, and at this difficult time in the world there's something to be said for sharing some tried and tested humourful novels and passing them on.

Apparently, we have all evolved since the strictures of 80s alternative comedy, when women were still a rarity on the bill. This makes it especially meaningful to read biographies of comedians who came through at this time.

I particularly delight in other people's disasters. Gina Yashere's *Cack-Handed* is hilarious. From female engineer to stand-up comedian, her storytelling is outrageously funny. The more recent and very, very funny memoir *My Mess is a Bit of a Life* by Georgia Pritchett is such a welcome gem. Particularly because she worries whether the monsters under her bed are comfy enough.

Whenever I start reading any of one the bold, outrageous witty novels that are available right now, it feels like I'm shaking hands with the funniest person in the room, or sneezing, or even orgasming if memory serves.

For the cost of a book or a stand-up ticket we can all reach a spiritual high and it staggers me that we don't celebrate it more. Laughter is non-binary. It no longer relies on a punchline or requires three people of different nationalities to go into a bar.

It has been said that some men read books mostly by men which, if true, might be a bit unfortunate, if only because I wouldn't want anyone to miss out.

Thankfully, the days of a pink “chick-lit” book cover are largely over, and we are reaching a new era of openness and pleasure. Witty, literary, libertine, self-mocking hedonism and freedom is on our doorstep, if not around the corner.

Labels are so over... aren't they?

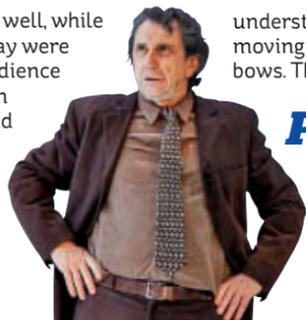
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This week I have been...

Theatre-going...

I went to see *Cock* by Mike Bartlett and was full of excitement to see such full-on bickering and the exploration of labels within relationships. On arrival we were told Jonathan Bailey was not going on, nor was poet and actress Jade Anouak. Only the marvellous Phil Daniels (inset) from the original

cast was fit and well, while copies of the play were available for audience members just in case. The wit and sarcasm of this clever play shone out in the hands and delivery of such stunning



understudies, and it made it very moving when they all took their bows. The audience went wild.

Painting...

I have got a new obsession about the wonders and ease of spray paint – no, not for graffiti, but for giving

my cheap wicker furniture a “refresh”. The act of spraying on wickerwork is surprisingly satisfying, if chemically smelly. I chose a hue called Serenity, which looked blue online but turned out to be an unmistakable green. The friend who sat on the newly refreshed wicker sofa took some of the paint home with her. On her slacks.

Topping up...

on Scandi noir. This time I have been box-setting *When the Dust Settles*. Such a clever idea. Something bad happens and then all the people who have been involved are followed up and their different stories all end up linking together. The joys of connection and follow-through can be found here – as well as in cricket.