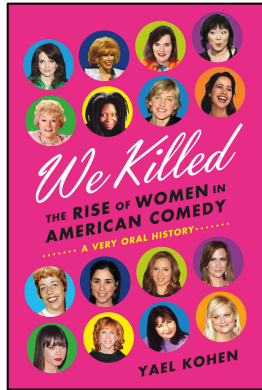


*We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy.*

By Yael Kohen. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. 308 pp.

*Reviewed by*  
Rebecca Krefting

Yael Kohen’s oral history, a treasure trove of first-person accounts documenting the lives of female comedy greats—writers, stand-up comics, and actresses—begins in the 1950s with Phyllis Diller and Elaine May and concludes in the late aughts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with Sarah Silverman and Chelsea Handler. The book offers a broad overview of the landscape of funny women in multiple comedic cultural forms, including stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, improvisational comedy, and television sitcoms. Kohen begins each chapter with brief italicized paragraphs setting the scene for the commentary to come. The rest of the content comes from an arrangement of interview excerpts with over two hundred women and men in the industry. At times, Kohen inserts short transition paragraphs throughout a chapter that help to guide or direct the

reader to different topics, projects, or individual writers and performers. With a dauntingly long list of participants, only a smattering of whom will be widely recognized, readers should expect to frequently cross-reference names (there is a “cast of characters” provided) in order to understand larger connections between writers, producers, agents, and actors. Most of those names belong to white folks and in general racial and sexual minorities are barely registered as social identities that complicate and compound women’s experiences in comedy. This means Kohen taps a specific market, although it is unclear whether this is due to issues of accessibility, a desire to capture mainstream comedy versus niche markets, or simply a matter of minimizing complications.

Spanning sixty years, incorporating multiple cultural forms, and considering hundreds of players in this game are just a few obstacles presented to anyone attempting to get a handle on women’s contributions to humor in U.S. history. This would be a difficult task for any single publication, but the oral history format that Kohen has chosen—strings of quotes with scant scaffolding—does not lend itself to a comprehensive history of anything. But this is not the primary objective here and should not be the reason you pick up this book; rather, Kohen cobbles together myriad voices and experiences, allowing them to share anecdotes and discuss careers in the entertainment industry. Disappointingly, Kohen’s original contributions to the chapters borrow heavily in phraseology and sentiment from the interview excerpts included. At times, this makes her writing a bit redundant and flat, a surprising outcome given her profession as writer for *Marie Claire* magazine. If there was ever a time to showcase her talent and cultivate a loyal readership, this would have been it.

Impelled by notable male entertainers such as Johnny Carson, Jerry Lewis, John Belushi, Al Franken, Christopher Hitchens, and Adam Carolla who say that women are not funny, women, like the mythical Sisyphus, seem fated to continue their more than a century-long struggle to prove otherwise. The generalizing and myopic statement that women are not funny becomes grist for this oral history. Several reviews published in

popular print sources suggest that Kohen's use of this hook as justification for the importance of this work in some ways validates these ridiculous claims. Here's the rub: on one hand, to frame a discussion on women's comedy around this infamous gender debate resuscitates the outmoded argument, launching it back into popular discourses; on the other hand, to ignore that these discourses have shaped (and may continue to shape) women's roles in entertainment—both how they are treated by others and how they view themselves—runs the risk of presenting an inchoate cultural history of women's comedy. Because this belief is so culturally pervasive, I do not take issue with Kohen taking this tack and support her decision to introduce the book as an argument against beliefs that women are not funny or as funny as men.

I do take exception, however, when she echoes other popular beliefs that are flat-out wrong, namely that women comics prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and particularly during the boom years of the 1980s and early 1990s were all “brassy, overweight, or sexually ambiguous” (179). This declaration, as with any statement that suggests an all-or-nothing, black-or-white rendering of an issue should, in general, be met with skepticism. This pretty vs. funny binary shows up repeatedly in popular print media over the past century, despite there always being women—beautiful *and* funny—who negate those assertions. In the early twentieth century, writers wrote editorials noting that female comedic vaudevillians had to give up something to get the laughs, like dignity, vanity, or good looks. And yet, Irene Franklin and Nora Bayes proved women vaudevillians could be funny while also easy on the eyes; Mae West was the paragon of glamour and droll wit; and Joan Rivers was a knockout, so much so that *Playboy* editors dropped their plans to make her a centerfold after seeing the stunning layout that was premised on her being an ugly duckling of sorts. During the 1980s and '90s, Elayne Boosler, Kathy Griffin, and Laura Kightlinger sexed up the stage, and many thought Janeane Garofalo was hot in a kind of alternative Gen X-Y way. When Kohen writes that Sarah Silverman and Chelsea Handler defy “old conventions that pretty could never be funny,” she ignores all the women who carved out a place for femmes prior to their arrival on the scene (293).

Now, here is why I liked the book and why it deserves a place on your already overcrowded bookshelf. For one, it is chock full of valuable primary source material that only a person with access and resources could obtain. Moreover, because there is such a vast range in participants, many of whom are not household names, Kohen's oral history offers readers data on important unsung entertainers and key players in the industry. Conversant with the scholarship available on gender and humor, I can say with confidence that I learned a lot from this oral history, like the reticence of television executives in the 1960s to advance sitcoms with an independent woman lead. Instead, shows like *That Girl* depicted a “kooky” or quirky female protagonist, a litmus test for audience acceptance and precursor to the unmarried career-oriented Moore in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (chapter 3). Kohen makes some refreshing points and arguments, as when she argues, contrary to existing criticism, that early seasons of *Saturday Night Live* allowed women to break into and pursue sketch comedy as both writers and performers. During this time, *SNL* was still a boy's club, but strides were made, progress that she rightly acknowledges (chapter 4). She also notes that self-deprecating humor, a common strategy employed by women comics in the mid-twentieth century and a style still frequently used by men and women alike to many ends, functions subversively to criticize societal standards impossible to attain (chapter seven). Few discuss self-deprecating comedy in this way. In short, this book is a good read for anyone interested in comedy, but it will also be useful this book to scholars like myself who can glean helpful primary

source data and who for a variety of reasons value incorporating the voices of research participants. Both interesting and entertaining, this book is a valuable contribution to the history of comedy with an astonishing roster of interviewees.

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