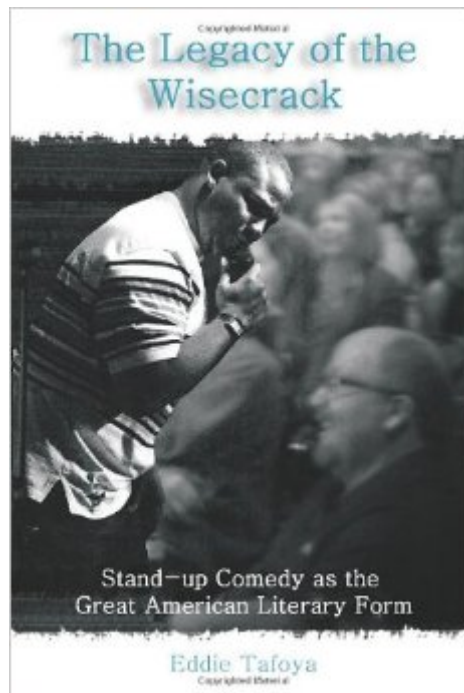


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# The Legacy Of The Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy As The Great American Literary Form



## Synopsis

Despite the claim of many a Borscht Belt comic that he is a practitioner of "the world's second-oldest profession," stand-up comedy is a young and distinctly American literary form. It was not until the last decades of the nineteenth century when, enabled by unprecedented prosperity and the right to free expression, that monologists began appearing in American vaudeville halls. Yet even though it has since become an entertainment industry mainstay, stand-up comedy has received precious little scholarly attention. *The Legacy of the Wisecrack: Stand-up Comedy as the Great American Literary Form* looks at the theory of stand-up comedy, its literary dimensions, and its distinctly American qualities as it provides a detailed history of the forces that shaped it. The study concludes with a look at the works of specific comedians such as Steven Wright, whose three decades of performances comprise a single picaresque tale, and Richard Pryor, whose 1982 masterpiece *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip* serves as modern America's answer to Dante Alighieri's epic poem, *Inferno*. The result is one of the first serious treatments of stand-up comedy as a literary form.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The following review has been posted here on behalf of its author, Izuu Nwankwo (PhD student, Nigeria) There are very few scholarly books on stand-up acts and Tafoya's work remains the most current and insightful. Many books on stand-up comedy tend to be promotional, aimed mostly to serve as developmental guides for upcoming stand-up comedians. In Tafoya's the use of existing theory and criticism is at once innovative and groundbreaking, in stand-up comedy research. I find

this book useful especially in the creative and convincing way it has manipulated the Freudian concepts of the id and the super-ego, in the understanding of how jokes make us laugh. One other thing that makes this work outstanding is the conversational manner in which the book is written. While we read, we are aware at the back of our minds that this is a scholarly work written by a practising stand-up comedian. In my view, this makes for a much more pleasurable reading as we get a grip on how and why stand-up comedy can also be categorised as literature. I have found this book indispensable in my own research due to the overall background information it carries with it. As such I believe it is a catalyst for further research, not only into stand-up, but also into other emergent popular performances and literature.

This was quite an exceptional book, perhaps the best I've read on what humor and stand-up comedy is and what it can do. It's a very serious and deep book and is only book I've really seen that talks about the spiritual dimensions of humor and the comedian. This author has an incredible background, that of literature and creative writing professor, and also a New Testament scholar. I loved this book because it treated comedy and humor as important topics worthy of serious study. This book forces you to work, but enriches you for your effort, I have to give a listen to Steven Wright soon after reading the chapter on him. There is a recognition and respect and honor paid by the author towards the subject of his study. This book is a scholarly work, but it's not written in esoteric, dense foggy language, but in understandable terms. This is not only a book about comedy, it's about the joy and rewards of reading and thinking, the power, beauty and mystery of words to communicative subjective meaning and how comedy fills a special niche in the use of language. This is an important book, not only in terms of comedy, but about life in general. Something tells me this author could probably lay down a pretty smoking sermon himself! Preach on brother! I wish we had more professors out there like this author willing to share his gifts of insight and analysis with his students and the rest of the world instead of the barren wasteland that academia has been for ages.

Eddie Tafoya's *THE LEGACY OF THE WISECRACK* combines history, Freud, postmodernism, and the little-known science of "fartology" to make a thought-provoking study of stand-up comedy. His discussion of comedians of diverse backgrounds casts humor in a cross-cultural perspective while bringing to light important but lesser known comedians such as Charley Case and Moms Mabley. The essay on the parallels between Richard Pryor's show "Live at the Sunset Strip" with Dante's *INFERNO* underscores the book's central argument that stand-up comedy is an

underappreciated literary art form. A brief discussion of why Jewish humor became America's dominant humor left me wanting more on this interesting topic. Tafoya's trenchant observations animate the pages from start to finish, making *THE LEGACY OF THE WISECRACK* absorbing and fun to read. We're left marveling at how humans have managed to survive tough times by wit alone.

Erudite author Eddie Tafoya presents an academic but highly entertaining history and study of humor. It takes a serious look at the human condition that is reflected in stand-up comedy: a safe way to expose the inner voice one would not otherwise dare to share in public. The reader's consciousness will be raised with the author's explanation of hidden meanings in humor. A truly enjoyable and educational read. Nancy Smoot Tramont

I study stand-up comedy academically and I'm blown away by Tafoya's analysis in *The Legacy of the Wisecrack*. He is academic without being distancing and provides a comprehensive look at one of America's most important yet underappreciated art forms.

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