

Book Review

Ellie Tomsett. 2023. *Stand-up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms: Sexism, Stereotypes and Structural Inequalities*. London: Bloomsbury, 280 pp.

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Stand-Up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms: Sexism, Stereotypes and Structural Inequalities is an in-depth look at women and feminism in stand-up comedy in the United Kingdom. The book takes an intersectional feminist approach to the study of comedy and importantly, states that this approach is inclusive of all women. In a political climate that is increasingly hostile towards transgender women, author Ellie Tomsett's assertion is, sadly, a welcome and necessary one. But, as Tomsett is the first to admit, women in the UK comedy scene are still primarily cisgender and white. Because of this, the inclusion of a diversity of voices can sometimes be limited. Again, this is something the book acknowledges and actively tries to correct as evidenced in Chapter 4's discussion of the additional harassment that women of color face online (misogynoir) and the ableism of comedy venues.

From discussing the historical roots of comedy in the UK to the rise of alt-right, incel, and TERF culture, this book argues that to fully explore feminism and comedy, it is important to address the political, economic, and social context in which it arises and operates within. *Stand-Up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms* does an excellent job of unpacking the implications of policies and practices that, while on the surface may not appear to be gendered, have a great impact on the lived experiences of women in comedy. For example, while the lack of funding for individual comedians in the UK might appear like a gender-neutral problem, Tomsett illustrates how it disproportionately impacts women who are already marginalized in the industry.

Tomsett's dedication to women in comedy is apparent in every aspect of the book including its methodology. As Tomsett argues, comedy research still tends to "foreground analysis of the content and performance style of comedy" (p. 3), without considering how comedy is created and the ways audience receive it. While Tomsett analyzes women's comedy routines (both feminist and postfeminist), she also includes rich information collected from her time as a participant-observer at the UK Women in Comedy festival, interviews with both comedians and comedy audience members, and even presents her own forms of policy-driven activism. Tomsett's use of multiple methodologies lends a personal richness to the text that demonstrates a deep-felt trust between researcher and research-participants.

Stand-Up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms takes on the task of unifying the comedy produced, the experiences of comedians and audience reception into “a cohesive argument” (p. 20). Each chapter of the book explores a different element of the industry through the lens of gender and feminism. Woven throughout the chapters are Tomsett’s own interjections as a researcher, fan, and volunteer which lends a grounded authenticity to the book.

Chapter 1 is an exploration of the development of the comedy circuit in the UK and the rise of women in comedy. Taking us through a history of the masculinization of comedy and comedy spaces, Tomsett lays the groundwork for the current exclusionary practices of the circuit that are discussed in Chapter 2. These include comedians’ self-policing of image, the assumption that comedy by women is a genre, and the casual sexism that women in comedy experience daily. This dovetails well with Chapter 3 which considers the creation of women-only comedy spaces and festivals. Tomsett’s personal experience as a researcher in residence with the UK Women in Comedy Festival in Manchester is demonstrative of their commitment to academic praxis. In addition to participant-observation and interviews with comedians and audience members, Tomsett’s survey of festival goers provides rich data regarding the expectations and experiences of audiences of women’s comedy. The impact and role of social media on women in comedy and the relationship between digital self-promotion and content creation, and sexism, racism, and transphobia is explored in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of both feminist and postfeminist discourse in comedic acts with contemporary examples such as Bridget Christie, Lolly Adefope, and Adrienne Truscott. Tomsett highlights how self-deprecating humor can both reinforce and resist societal pressures that are placed on women. Chapter 6 looks at the backlash to women in comedy and feminist comedy. Despite the proliferation of feminist comedy in the UK, this chapter addresses the obstacles to gaining a mainstream platform as a woman in the industry. Tomsett explores the sexism that is mutually reinforced through televised comedy and the comedy circuit.

Chapter 7 importantly describes comedy as a creative industry. I believe this is of particular importance to the field of comedy and humor studies. There is still limited work on live comedy as a creative industry despite it fitting squarely within the definition of one (exceptions include: Butler and Stoyanova Russell 2018; Jeffries 2017; Lane-McKinley 2022; Trusolino 2022). The book discusses how comedy’s history in gentleman’s clubs, its vulgarity, and its association as a low art form make it a victim of a classist, and often sexist, system of art categorization: a theme woven throughout the book.

The book presents a critical perspective on studies and reports by members of the entertainment industry, like Ticketmaster, and government studies on gender and comedy that tend to leave out important stakeholders, such as the comedians

themselves. Tomsett also critiques approaches to diversity that merely add women to the line-up or panel, in the case of televised comedy panel shows, rather than meaningfully addressing structural inequalities. Tomsett questions the efficacy of these top-down initiatives and instead platforms bottom-up advocacy. The book highlights the agency of the performers whether it be through the creation of women-only comedy festivals, the formation of the Safe Home Collective which helps women and non-binary performers get home safe from late night gigs, or the creation of biting feminist critique packaged in outlandish comedic acts.

The scope of *Stand-Up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms* is geographically limited to the UK, but this does not make the project any less ambitious particularly because of its thoughtful dedication to expounding on all elements of the industry. Although Tomsett notes the importance of not conflating UK comedy with comedy industries in other countries – for instance, the book describes the lack of Black and women of color comedians in the UK when compared to the United States – many of the book's lessons can be used as jumping off points for further international research on comedy. One example is the book's insight into the overlap between gender discrimination, the history of comedy, and its precarious environment: a useful connection that can be explored in other geographical contexts.

While the breadth of the book is indeed one of its strengths, it is also the place where it potentially falters. Tomsett's over thirteen years of study in the comedy community is a remarkable asset, but at times the content of the book can feel slightly rushed or disjointed. Chapter 5 and part of Chapter 6's analyses of comedic acts are interesting but do seem like a departure in the text. The rest of the book focuses more on the lived experiences of women in comedy and audiences. As Tomsett notes, much of the work on feminist comedy privileges content analysis. Combining the content analysis aspects of Chapters 5 and 6 into a single chapter or weaving them throughout the book would have been welcomed. This would allow for an expansion of, for example, the comedy and the creative industries chapter, which would add to the book's originality.

The book does a remarkable job of providing a nuanced understanding of women in comedy without flattening or even unifying their experiences. Tomsett then accomplishes their goal of presenting contemporary feminisms in stand-up comedy. Importantly, the book is not merely descriptive, but prescriptive. The book provides concrete suggestions for both the industry and future research. At the core of Tomsett's suggestions is a call to listen to "those who work within the comedy industry," to "unite theoretical writing on comedy and practice, as well as to hopefully make tangible changes to the industry for minority groups" (p. 230). *Stand-Up Comedy and Contemporary Feminisms* is not only a welcome addition to feminist comedy research, but a necessary one.

References

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