

No Joke, by Ruth R. Wisse

Books in the [June 12, 2013](#) issue

In Review

Ruth R. Wisse



No Joke

By Ruth R. Wisse

Princeton University Press

One cannot think of American comedy without mentioning Jewish contributions, from the Marx brothers to Mel Brooks. Jewish humor goes back as far as the Hebrew Bible, yet Jews did not become known for their humor until the Enlightenment, says Ruth

R. Wisse. Modern Jewish humor rose in response to oppressive conditions; even in repressive Russia and Hitler's genocidal Germany humor thrived. It was often closely tied to the Yiddish dialect, sometimes making it difficult to translate jokes to another language and culture. Because Jewish humor arose in response to specific conditions of living, Wisse organizes chapters around locales and times: Germany, the Anglo-sphere, fascism (Hitler and Stalin) and modern Israel. Wisse calls humor the only folk art that isn't copyrighted.