

The New York Times

EDITORS'
NOTE:
THIS SECTION
IS NOT
APPROPRIATE
FOR
GROWN-UPS

For Kids

THE FUNNY INSTITUTE

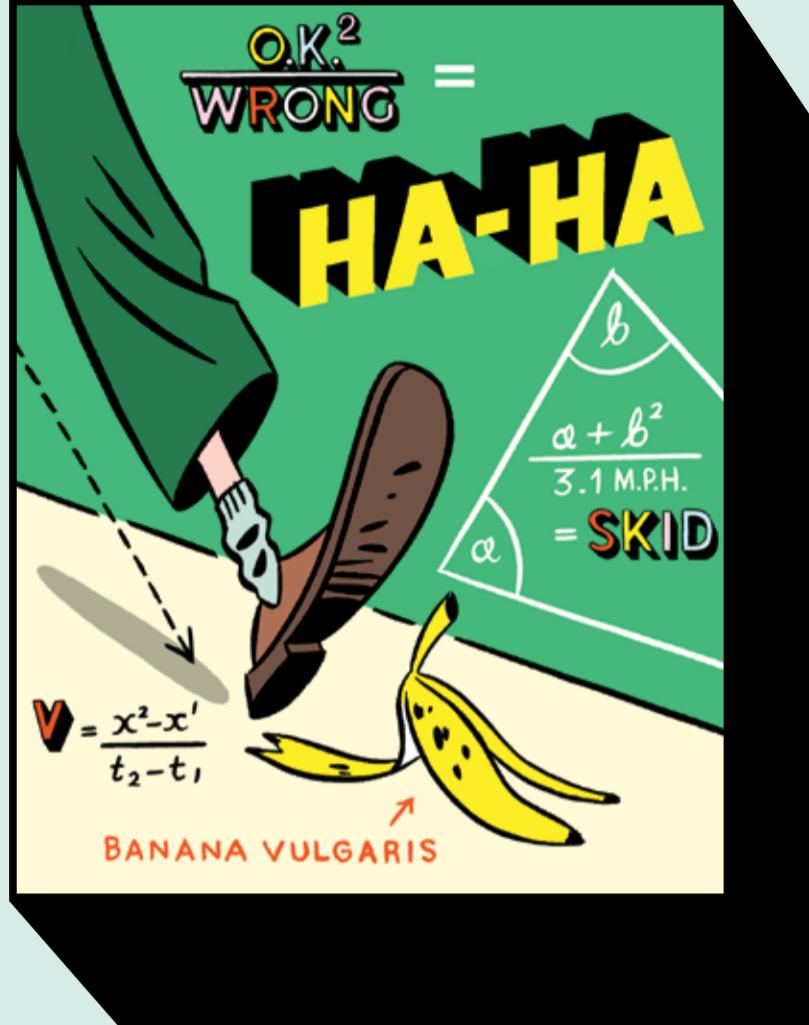
A TOADALLY BONKERS BOARD GAME • YOUR MOST EMBARRASSING
MOMENTS • DELICIOUS PEANUT-BUTTER COOKIES THAT LOOK LIKE POOP • HOW TO
SURVIVE SEEING YOUR TEACHER IN THE WILD • A FART CHART • ARE
THE PRESIDENT'S INSULTS ACTUALLY FUNNY? • SO MANY PUNS YOU'LL HATE US
• FARTICLES, FARTICLES AND MORE FARTICLES

ILLUSTRATION BY ZOHAR LAZAR

Science

THE SCIENCE OF HUMOR

BY KELLY CONABOY · ILLUSTRATION BY JASON FORD



WHY IS IT that sometimes when you tell your friend a very funny joke — like about his body odor — that friend doesn't laugh? Is it jealousy? Or could it be some sort of... science-related reason?

What makes something funny has been a question pondered by thinkers since humans had butts. The ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle believed humor came about when someone was made to feel superior to another person; the superfamous psychiatrist Sigmund Freud thought funniness arose from the mention of unmentionable things. The popular theory until recently was that a joke got laughs when something surprising happened, like — just for example — a cat completing a (purr-fect) pirouette.

These theories help to explain both what makes something funny and the social purpose of humor: It's used to bond groups, and to make scary things less scary. It also allows kids and adults alike to be creative and silly. But each of these ideas had some humor holes — something could be surprising, for example, but not prompt a laugh. (BOO! See?)

The newest accepted theory, called the "benign violation theory" by scientists, claims that to be funny something has to be wrong in an unexpected way (a violation) but ultimately O.K. (benign). The idea arose from studies done by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren at the University of Colorado at Boulder's Humor Research Lab — a group experimenting not on rubber chickens and whoopee cushions but instead on whether its subjects find one joke funnier than a slightly different version of the same joke. Hilarious! Their studies found that people laugh the most when something seems weird, wrong or surprising, but turns out to be fine. For example, if your friend slips on a banana peel and gets hurt, that's just wrong. But if she slips on a banana peel and is fine, well — that's just funny.

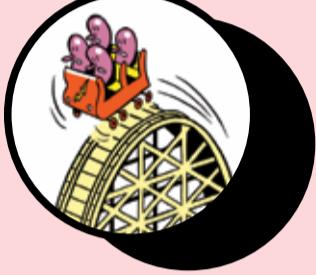
"What's useful about this idea," McGraw says, "is that it explains why not everybody finds your joke funny, even if you do." That is, what might be wrong-but-O.K. to you might just be wrong, or just O.K., to someone else. If it doesn't achieve both things, your joke becomes either rude or boring — explaining why your friend might not find that body-odor joke funny. Luckily, there's always experimentation; maybe he'd prefer a joke about his unfortunate haircut? ♦

SILLY SCIENCE FOR THE WIN

BY CHELSEA LEU

THE NOBEL PRIZE is serious. Winning one means you've contributed something invaluable to the world. You're given a gold medal, hundreds of thousands of dollars and, best of all, everlasting glory. The Ig Nobel Prizes are... not those prizes. They're awarded every year to the weirdest research — including published papers with titles like "Why Do Old Men Have Big Ears?" Winners receive a handmade trophy and 10 trillion Zimbabwean dollars (worth pretty much nothing). Yes, this is still real research! But this time, you're allowed to laugh at it. Here are three recent honorees.

KIDNEY STONES AND ROLLER COASTERS



Having kidney stones is horrible. They're tiny, scratchy pebbles that develop in the kidney and need to be peed out. Ouch. Last year, two doctors from Michigan State University won the Ig Nobel Prize in Medicine by discovering a method to help shake them out: a roller-coaster ride. The doctors made a fake kidney and filled it with kidney stones (taken from an overjoyed patient) and pee (from a researcher). They put the whole contraption in a backpack and took a trip to Walt Disney World, where they rode the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad roller coaster 20 times in one day. "It ceases to be fun pretty darn quick," says David Wartinger, one of the researchers. The ride, though, did help coax out kidney stones, especially when researchers sat in the last few cars. "You're looking for a rough, quick coaster," Wartinger says. "One that knocks your fillings loose." Whee!

CROCODILES AND SLOT MACHINES



Do your emotions affect how daring you are? Yup — especially if that emotion is fear. Two psychologists in Australia, winners of the Ig Nobel in Economics in 2017, gave \$20 to more than 100 tourists before or after they held a roughly three-foot-long saltwater crocodile. Then they asked them to use that money on a virtual slot machine. It turns out that holding a crocodile makes you less likely to take risks: Most people without gambling problems made smaller bets afterward, possibly because animals that could rip your fingers off remind you to be more cautious.

DIDGERIDOOS AND SNORING



The didgeridoo is an extremely long wind instrument traditionally played by Aboriginal Australians with astonishing breath control. Obviously it can help with snoring. Right? Researchers gave didgeridoos to 14 very loud snorers in Switzerland, who took lessons on how to play. To measure later whether they were snoring less, the researchers asked the patients' partners how well they slept. (The ratings included "not disturbed at all" and "very, very severely disturbed.") "Regular didgeridoo playing is an effective treatment alternative," the scientists concluded — and for that, they won the Ig Nobel Peace Prize. ♦

BY NICHOLAS ST. FLEUR
ILLUSTRATION BY MARK MATCHO

ASTRONAUTS HAVE ONE of the best jobs in the world. They get to fly into space and, aboard the International Space Station, ooh and ahh at our beautiful planet from 250 miles away. Yes, their view from up there is literally out of this world, but there's a hiccup: No matter how far humans venture from Earth, we can't escape our biology. We get hungry, and itchy, and we need to poop. These human foibles make for some funny space stories.

WHEN MICROGRAVITY ISN'T FUN

Astronauts face tiny challenges every day. Like having to poop. In zero gravity, you don't really "sit" to go No. 2. Instead, you point your rear end above a tiny aluminum toilet equipped with a suction fan, and then you catch your poop in a baggie. It's the

best way to keep your feces from floating away. "Aim is everything," says the astronaut Drew Feustel. "If you miss, you can create a large mess for yourself." Using the suction tubes beats having to tape a collecting bag to your behind — as the Apollo astronauts used to do.

SANDWICH STUNT

In 1965, the astronaut John Young broke the rules: He smuggled a corned-beef sandwich onto the Gemini 3 space capsule. This got him in big trouble. At the time, NASA was developing freeze-dried foods, because they were worried regular food would send crumbs flying throughout the spacecraft. NASA's space food didn't taste good, though, so Young stowed a scrumptious sandwich in his pocket. Back on Earth, Congress had a beef with the sandwich. They said Young

had wasted millions of dollars by eating it instead of the NASA space food he was supposed to test. But Young got the last laugh: In 1981, NASA added corned beef to their space menu.

STINKY-SOCK SURPRISE

Another gross thing about being an astronaut aboard the I.S.S. is that you're surrounded by tiny floating flecks of dead skin practically everywhere you go. "We have to clean it with a vacuum every single week, or else our equipment breaks down," Feustel says. Things become particularly disgusting when astronauts change their socks. You see, after being in space for two or three months, the dead skin on the bottom of their feet falls off. When astronauts remove their socks, there's an explosion of skin flakes that float around the station. Hilarious, but also... yuck. ♦

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'THIS
ZOMBIE
WON'T BITE,
BUT SHE'LL
TALK YOUR
EAR OFF'
OCT. 19, 2015

5.
'JEREMY
THE LEFTY
SNAIL IS
DEAD. HIS
OFFSPRING
ARE ALL
RIGHT.'
OCT. 12, 2017

6.
'SMELLS
LIKE GREEN
SPIRIT'
MARCH 3, 2013

7.
'TEETH
DON'T MEAN
A THING
IF THEY
AIN'T
GOT THAT
"BLING"'
JUNE 29, 2001

8.
'THE SKI
MOGUL'S
RISKY RUN'
MARCH 15, 1998

9.
'HERE
COME THE
SONS'
MARCH 19, 2018