

Hammer and Tickle

Lewis

What is it? A humor anthology, a romance, a history, or a philosophy

Like other reviewers, I bought this volume looking for an anthology of communist jokes. Instead, it is a history of humor in the communist world, or perhaps a history of communism seen through the prism of its humor.

Other reviewers have noted that the book weaves together several rather incongruous threads. There is a history of the author's romance with a woman from the former East Germany, juxtaposing her unrepentant affection for communism, flaws and all, with his humorous, or perhaps cynical irreverence about everything in general and communism in particular. Then there is a history of the Soviet Union and of communism, played out in interviews with the likes of Lech Walesa. There is a history of official humor as a propaganda vehicle, and finally, the stuff we were looking for, the underground jokes that poked fun at communism.

An authors should begin a book with a notion of who his readership might be. Lewis' book lacks that focus. He has parts for people who are just looking for jokes, historians and philosophers. Assessing each thread separately, I would say that he doesn't do a bad job with any of them. But just as you would not buy a single book to teach you how to cook and drywall, neither would I expect many people will be interested in the full range of Lewis' interests.

The book does have its bright points. First, he has edited the jokes fairly well. In any anthology of 1000 jokes the reader starts to gag after about 50 of them, wondering where the good ones are. In this book the jokes are sparse enough that when you come across one, you generally laugh. The strength of the joke is in the telling. Like any author, Lewis has taken liberties to structure the jokes optimally. He does a pretty good job.

Lewis wrote his amalgam of communist humor, 'A Day in the Life of Ivan Zimpsonovich,' featuring Elizaveta and Bartski. A typical joke: 'Supper-time,' Mrs Zimpsonovich calls from the kitchen. 'Sausage soup,' she lies. She serves Bartski takes a spoonful of soup, but before he puts it in his mouth, he sees something black and rubbery on his spoon. Yuck, look, Mum,' he says, "there's a piece of tyre in my soup!' 'Eat it, Bartski,' says his father. This is another achievement of Socialism. Barely fifty-five years since the Revolution, and already we have almost completely replaced the horse with the automobile.'

Lewis' history of communism hits all of the major phases of development in the Soviet Union, and also illustrates the uniqueness of the interpretations of communism in several of the satellites, especially East Germany, Romania, Hungary and Poland. He captures Joseph Stalin's own grim sense of humor, his paranoid ability to liquidate large numbers of the people around him and joke with them about it at the same time.

Perhaps the best measure of a book is whether or not you have the stomach to finish it. This one on my Kindle for four days before I got to the last chapter, but I did get all the way through it and I'm glad that I did.