

# HUMOR MAKES LIFE MORE TOLERABLE. INTERVIEW WITH AMERICAN FOLKLORIST TREVOR J. BLANK

*Interviewer Henri Zeigo*

## Books published by Trevor J. Blank

Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet, 2018 (edited by Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill)

Diagnosing Folklore: Perspectives on Disability, Health, and Trauma, 2015 (edited by Trevor J. Blank and Andrea Kitta)

Maryland Legends: Folklore from the Old Line State (American Legends), 2014, by Trevor J. Blank and David J. Puglia

Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet (Current Arguments in Folklore), 2014, by Trevor J. Blank

The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age (Folklore Studies in a Multicultural World), 2013, by Trevor J. Blank

Tradition in the Twenty-First Century: Locating the Role of the Past in the Present, 2013 (edited by Trevor J. Blank and Robert Glenn Howard)

Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction, 2012 (edited by Trevor J. Blank)

Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World, 2009, by Trevor J. Blank

Spring Grove State Hospital (Images of America: Maryland), 2008, by David S. Helsel, M.D., and Trevor J. Blank



**There was the International Society of Humor Studies conference in Tallinn (25–29 June) where American folklorist Dr. Trevor J. Blank presented his latest research topic called “How the Mighty Have Fallen: American Celebrity Scandals and Humor Dynamics Online” (<https://youtu.be/8mSUD61TKFg>). Dr. Blank is associate professor of communication at the State University of New York at Potsdam. He is the editor of *Folklore and the Internet* and *Folk Culture in the Digital Age*, and author of *The Last Laugh: Folk Humor, Celebrity Culture, and Mass-Mediated Disasters in the Digital Age*.**

**In the light of Dr. Blank’s recent research, the Estonian Literary Museum conducted an interview with him in order to examine some crucial aspects of his work and ask about his approaches to his field of study.**

**Trevor Blank, how did you become interested in folklore studies?**

I became interested in folklore studies as an undergraduate at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. I met the former state folklorist by the name Charley Camp who was teaching a class about American folk life there. I sat in on his class and was really interested in his discussion of ethnography, which I was not really familiar with up to that point. So I befriended him. He invited me in his house a few times and shared books with me and articles that he thought I would find interesting. Originally, I was working towards becoming a high school social studies teacher, but I soon felt disillusion with that career path. So it was Charley who recommended that I go to Indiana University for graduate school to study folklore. I got my master’s degree there in 2007. However, because I wanted to study internet culture for my doctoral dissertation, which my advisors generally did not consider to be a serious area of study, I ended up at Penn State University where I finished my Ph.D. in American Studies with a concentration on folklore. I have been studying internet culture ever since, because it embraced my research interests in the subject and helped instill the confidence I needed to pursue it.

**Was there any sign that appeared in your early childhood which showed the way to your future career?**

When I was a kid, I loved telling stories. One time in the 3rd grade I got into trouble for telling a dirty joke to my friends. I will tell you as best I can remember it ... there is a young boy who was walking around his neighborhood one day. An older woman was standing in her doorway and said: “Come inside.” The boy said: “My mommy told me not to and I do not think I want to.” She said: “I will give you three cookies if you come with me.” The boy agreed to go.



*Trevor J. Blank. Photograph by Alar Madisson 2018.*

Now the older lady said: “Come upstairs with me!” The boy said: “My mommy told me not to and I think I do not want to.” The woman promised to give five cookies this time if he agrees to come upstairs. So the boy went upstairs. After that the older woman urged the boy to sit on her bed. The boy answered as before and the woman had to give him ten cookies for him to agree. Then the lady asked him to climb on top of her. The payment for saying yes was twenty cookies this time. So the boy goes on top of her and they start to wrestle. Suddenly, the woman’s husband comes home and starts to yell: “Get off my wife!” to which the boy says “My mommy told me not to and I think I do not want to.” (laugh) ... This was the first time I remember getting into trouble for telling a joke. I was hooked. I have always been interested in collecting dirty jokes that

people are embarrassed to tell in front of the others, because humor allows to broach sensitive and taboo subjects out in the open while revealing a great deal about the human condition and how to respond to the trials and tribulations of everyday life. As a folklorist, I am especially interested in how people make meaning in everyday life.

**What kind of jokes were generally popular in your childhood?**

A lot of jokes that I can remember were like songs where the existing melody was mixed with the lyrics about authorities that we knew. By the time I went to college and started to collect jokes, I started to become acutely aware of political jokes and figures that were subjects of parody.

**Your recent research topic is about American celebrity humor. What makes jokes about American celebrities so unique when compared to the rest of authorities?**

In America, the celebrities are like royalty. We put them on the pedestal and give them an exalted status within society. Because of their privileged status they are a great target for jokes. It is fun to take them down and poke holes in their public persona. Lots of jokes are about celebrities, because it seems that they have all. They have a great life, they are financially stable and loved by lots of people. Everybody wants to become rich and famous in America, but most people will not reach huge levels of success in the way that celebrities do. We project a lot of our hopes and dreams onto them. We follow them and we think of them almost like an extension of us. When celebrities betray us, such as with a scandal or the committing of a crime, we try to symbolically keep our distance from them. Humor is one way to say: "I do not appreciate what are you doing." A great example would be Bill Cosby. Bill Cosby was a celebrated comedian, known in the 1960s and 70s for his stand-up comedy, and in the 1980s for his widely popular television show in which he was the star. People loved him and thought of him as a fatherly character in American society. And then we came to know that there are some serious allegations against him that span decades, which we only recently learned about: that he has been allegedly sexually assaulting women. One of the best ways to express rage is through humor.

**It seems that American celebrities need attention in order to be famous. Can humor make somebody more popular than he was before?**

Most of the jokes that I collect about celebrities are about individuals who have already attained that status. My expertise falls under humor that works to take a celebrity down rather than build them up. Take, for example, Amy Winehouse.



*Limor Shifman, Trevor J. Blank, and Liisi Laineste discussing internet humor at the ISHS conference at Tallinn University on 28 June 2018. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2018.*

She was a singer known for her raw talent, but also for her problems with drug and alcohol abuse. So lots of jokes about her that followed her death focused on her addictions. When she died, a lot of people did not have compassion for her, because they felt that her death was her own doing.

**Can humor also affect policy-making? For instance, there were lots of dirty jokes about Donald Trump, but suddenly he managed to win in an upset in the last American election.**

It is an interesting case, because it has a lot to do with the power of social media. People liked Trump, because they believed he would shake the system and would provide a new way of governing. There were lots of jokes about how he speaks and acts, as well as about his mannerisms. I still find them funny.

There is a saying in America that we call the middle part of the United States “fly over the country”. That is the big area in the middle of the country where planes typically fly over, but do not stop. People who were living there

were afraid that they were losing their way of life and that they were seen as unimportant. In the eyes of their government, Trump, for them, symbolically embodies what America is for them. Humor was used to take him down, but his voters did not live in major media markets. They lived, for example, in places like Nebraska, which you may have never heard about.

**What do you think about the Harvey Weinstein case? It seems that celebrities started this campaign called #MeToo and somehow the folk took it over.**

Rose McGowan is probably the most prominent American celebrity who started the #MeToo movement by talking about her encounters with Harvey Weinstein. She used her platform on Twitter to say: "It happened to me, I am a woman, and these things happen to women commonly." She also got some feedback from males who did not pay enough attention to what she said. This spurred the folk into action. Other women also came forward to share their experiences and say openly that this was not a story that only happens to famous people; it also happens to common people.

In college campuses in the United States one out of five students has experienced some form of sexual assault during their college years. Celebrity culture used their exalted status to create a platform for public discussion so that other women could come out and talk about their stories.

**Does humor have power to make society better?**

Yes, it does. I think humor makes life more tolerable. There is a saying in America: "Death is certain, but life is not."

**In different societies there are various understandings of what is racial, religious, and sexual humor. Do you think that humor should have some sort of limits?**

I do not think there should be limits for humor. Recently, I had a student who was really upset that I assigned an article about suicide humor for a folklore class that I was teaching. This student felt that it was morally wrong that I assigned such a reading. I had to politely explain why this was important and why this was an area we should study, because these things exist whether we acknowledge them or not. I think studying all forms of humor is valuable, regardless of whether it is good or bad. There should not be criteria for what humor should or should not be studied, because all kinds of humor help us to understand the human condition and how people respond to different stresses in life, or provide insights into how people play with one another. As a folklor-

ist, I am interested in how people express themselves in everyday life. I am interested in all aspects of humor. For instance, I collected Ku Klux Klan humor in the past. And it is not kind or good. Nevertheless, I learned a great deal about one segment of the American population. Humor can even provide a window into understanding some secret aspects of life. Things that people do not want to talk about openly. Thereby we can learn more about the nature of race, gender, etc.

**So humor alleviates stress in some kinds of problems that need to be solved in society too?**

Yes, I think it is fair to say so.

**Have you had any new research topics recently?**

Well, I have now an 18-months-old son who has kept me quite busy. Mostly, I have been continuing my work on digital culture. I am working on an edited collection called “Folklore and Social Media”. That is going to be a new book which continues the discussions in my previous edited collections about how people express themselves through digital technologies. I do not sleep much anymore, because I work all the time, but it is lots of fun and I like it.

**Kids can also be the subject of examining humor. Have you learnt something from your own child?**

This is one of the things why I like being a dad. My son does not say really much yet; he acts out and points to stuff and laughs. It is so much fun to be a parent.

**During your stay in Estonia, have you found something noticeable or funny here?**

In America it is quite normal to smile – even at a stranger when you pass each other on the street. But when I was in Estonia and said hello to a stranger with a smile on my face, the person stared back at me rather awkwardly and seemed very confused, because he did not know me. I do not know if it was a coincidence or not, but I must be very careful not to smile so often here (laughs). Smiling is something very natural for me when communicating with others. For example, when I go to an elevator, normally I smile and make eye-contact with the other individuals who are riding along.