

Don't joke about Jesus



SALLY GIMSON talks to American author **SHALOM AUSLANDER** about laughter and the power to subvert

SHALOM AUSLANDER LIKES to shock. His latest novel, *Mother for Dinner*, is about a family of cannibals. It's funny, outrageous and a bitter critique on US society and identity politics.

The book is a long joke and the plot is based on William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Auslander is attracted to the idea of writing the great American novel, but he also feels the idea is too serious.

His previous work was called *Hope: A Tragedy*, about Anne Frank ageing and geriatric in an attic in New England, writing furiously.

It won the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize in 2013 and was named by *The Times* in London last year as "possibly the funniest novel of the decade".

Creating humour out of the taboo is Auslander's trademark.

"For me, laughter and comedy were a lifesaver – they are why I am still alive," he told *Index*. "I'd have offed myself a long time ago if I couldn't laugh."

Auslander was born into an ultra-orthodox Jewish family in Monsey, New York, which he has also written about in his memoir, *Foreskin's Lament*.

It is this upbringing which has inspired much of his work – the rituals and religion he rebelled against but is still attracted to, and in which he finds comfort.

The original short story he has written for *Index*, which we publish here, is a ritual joke which Auslander subverts, to challenge our sense of humour and readiness to be offended.

The story ends with the most basic joke of all. Twenty years ago, said Auslander, if he had been called by *Index* to write a short story he would have thought he should write something "serious and heavy" about voices being shut down.

"And now I find the thing people most aren't allowed to say, the thing people get

most cancelled for, is a joke which I know would be funny if it were fiction, but if it's something you actually have to live in it's much less funny."

Auslander's heroes, apart from Faulkner, are Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka – "who were funny about the darkest of things" – Flannery O'Connor and Kurt Vonnegut. Stand-up US comedians Bill Hicks and Lenny Bruce are also important to him "and suffered". Hicks's routine was cut from David Letterman's TV show in 1993 because of jokes about anti-abortionists and religion. He died of cancer shortly after.

Auslander is now living in California with his family because, he says, his British wife wanted the good weather. His targets are not just right-wing, populist adherents of former US president Donald Trump but leftists, of whom he was once one but who he now accuses of having lost their sense of humour.

"I grew up left wing and it was always the right wing which were saying 'Don't joke, watch what you say, don't joke about Jesus, don't joke about God and abortion isn't funny', and my heroes – whether they were novelists or comedians or artists – were always on the left, laughing. Now it's like everyone says you are not allowed to laugh about anything." He sees a USA where people are divided because the voice of "the lunatics" is amplified.

"If you listen to the loonies on either

side – which is all the media, including the social media – you believe we all want to hang each other or kill each other. The reality is 99% of us agree with 99% of things. We are not particularly divided about issues. We are just being led around by the lunatics.

"One of the things lunatics hate is laughter: they hate jokes. What laughter and comedy has always [done] is to take power away from people and knock them down to size."

He added that it used to be said that the first things fascists did when they came into power was to kill the wits, the writers and the comedians.

"That was the first thing they did, kill them all, because they knew [the wits, the writers, the comedians] had the power to cut them all down."

Auslander is an evangelist for laughter. He quotes Faulkner again in an introduction to a collection of stories by Sherwood Anderson saying that humour was a critical part of culture and who Americans are.

He says also he read that writers who wrote with a smile eventually get taken seriously. "My hope," he told *Index*, "is that it's the opposite: that writers who write seriously with their head in their hands eventually get laughed at."

Auslander is a contrarian. He wants the serious to be challenged but he does want to be taken seriously. He reflects ruefully that he would have more awards



Humour and laughter is saying 'We are not all that great, we are pretty silly', whereas tragedy tries to make us all noble, which we are not

if he moved people to tears. Instead, he finds that he is writing books that are well-received, but sometimes too difficult for popular consumption.

He said he thought Americans found the issues in *Mother for Dinner* particularly hard to talk about.

He doesn't know which is worse, being insulted for what he writes or that people are unwilling even to talk about his work.

"In some ways that's the more irritating one – to hear back from media of any kind, 'Well, we really liked it, but we can't talk about it'. That just makes me angry because I know these people in three weeks' time are going to be on an interview somewhere, patting themselves on the back for being bastions of free speech."

Auslander says that "after years of therapy" he still wakes up in the morning feeling tragic, but he doesn't want more tragedy in his life.

Laughter, he says, comes from being



Now I find the thing people most aren't allowed to say, the thing people get most cancelled for, is a joke which I know would be funny if it were fiction, but if it's something you actually have to live in it's much less funny

oppressed, and the funniest people in the USA today are no longer Jews but Latinos and African Americans, "because they are suffering the most".

But most of all, Auslander sees laughter as reflecting the absurdity of the human condition.

"Humour and laughter is saying 'We are not all that great, we are pretty silly', whereas tragedy tries to make us

all noble, which we are not. We are all laughable, and I find great comfort in that. It probably makes for a better future if we understand we are all just a bunch of assholes, and that's funny."

Sally Gimson is a UK-based freelance writer and an associate editor at Index

50(01):84/89|DOI:10.1177/03064220211012313

Anti-Ha

by SHALOM AUSLANDER

A MAN WALKS into a pub and sits down at the bar. At the table nearby sit a rabbi, a priest and a nun with a parrot on her shoulder.

The bartender eyes them.

He doesn't want any trouble.

The man's name is Lipschitz, and he doesn't want any trouble either. It's been a long day, looking for a job, any job, but to no avail. Once upon a time he could earn a hundred dollars a night, at pubs much like this one, delivering his comedy routine to a joyful, appreciative crowd. But that feels like a long time ago. Now he just wants a drink. He would sit somewhere else if he could, well away from the possibility of a joke, but it is Friday night and the pub is full. For a moment

he considers leaving. The bartender comes over.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asks.

Lipschitz glances at the table nearby.

The rabbi sips his scotch. The priest checks his phone. The nun orders a cranberry and soda.

"Just a beer," says Lipschitz.

The parrot says nothing.

Nobody laughs.

Phew.

* * *

A beautiful blonde woman walks into a pub and sits down at the bar.

The woman's name is Laila. She is of Islamic descent on her father's side, and she sits at the bar beside Lipschitz, who is of Jewish descent on his mother's side.

There's nothing funny about that. The Arab-Israeli conflict has led to the loss of countless innocent lives.



The parrot is being judgmental, and is only considering the man's actions from its own privileged heteronormative perspective

→ The bartender comes over.
“What can I get you?” he asks.
Laila orders a martini.

She glances over at the rabbi, the priest and the nun with the parrot on her shoulder. Laila has a devilish glint in her eye, a certain mischievous sparkle that Lipschitz finds both alluring and troublesome.

“Well,” she says with a smile, “it’s better than a parrot with a nun on its shoulder.”

Uh-oh, thinks Lipschitz.

He doesn’t want any trouble.

The bartender, a young man with a ponytail and a scruffy goatee, casts a watchful eye over them. He wears a brown T-shirt with the words HUMOR LESS in large white letters across the front. Lipschitz had seen such shirts before – and the hats and the hoodies and the laptop stickers. The first time he saw it was a year ago, at what was to be his very last nightclub performance. He had made a joke about his mother, and a man in the front row, wearing the same shirt, stood up and began to heckle him.

“Boo!” the man shouted. “Mother jokes are weapons of the patriarchy designed to minimise the role of women in the parenting unit!”

Jokes and jest were the latest targets in the global battle against offence, affrontery and injustice. The movement’s founders, who proudly called themselves Anti-Ha, opposed humour in all its forms. They did so because they believed, as so many philosophers have, that jokes are based

on superiority. Plato wrote that laughter was “malicious”, a rejoicing at the misery of others. Aristotle, in his Poetics, held that wit was a form of “insolence”. Hobbes decreed that laughter is “nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of eminency in ourselves”, while Descartes went so far as to say that laughter was a form of “mild hatred”.

The heckler stormed out of the club, and half the audience followed him.

“Laughter,” read the back of his T-shirt, “Is The Sound of Oppression.”

The movement grew rapidly. In New York, you could be fined just for telling a riddle. A woman in Chicago, visiting a friend, stood at the front door and called, “Knock knock!” and wound up spending the night in jail. In Los Angeles, long the vanguard of social progress, a man on Sunset Boulevard was recorded by a concerned passer-by laughing to himself as he walked down the street. The outraged passer-by posted the video online, where it instantly went viral and the man could no longer show his face outside. The subsequent revelation that the man suffered from Tourette’s Syndrome, and that his laughter was caused not by derision or superiority but by a defect in the neurotransmitters in his brain, did little to change anyone’s mind. No apologies were given nor regrets expressed; in fact, the opposition to humour only increased now that it was scientifically proven that laughter is caused by a brain defect, and “#Science” trended in the Number One spot for over two weeks.

Laila nudges Lipschitz.

“Hey,” she whispers. “Wanna hear a joke?”

Lipschitz stiffens.

“It’s a good one,” she sings.

Lipschitz knows she’s trying to tempt him. He knows he should head straight for the door. But it’s been a rough day, another rough day, and the booze isn’t working anymore, and soon he’ll have to go home and tell his mother and sister that he didn’t find work – again – and so in his languor and gloom, he looks into Laila’s dancing green-flecked eyes and says, with a shrug, “Sure.”

Laila leans over, hides her mouth with her hand and whispers the joke in his ear. →



CREDIT: Camelia Dobrin / Ikon Images

→ The rabbi and the priest discuss God.
The nun feeds her parrot some crackers.
Laila finishes the joke and sits back up, utterly straight-faced, as if nothing at all had happened. Lipschitz, though, cannot control himself. The joke is funny, and he can feel himself beginning to laugh. It begins as a slight tickle in his throat, then the tickle grows, swells, like a bright red balloon in his chest that threatens to burst at any moment.

Lipschitz runs for the door, trying to contain his laughter until he gets outside, but he bumps into a waitress as he goes, upsetting the serving tray in her hand and causing two orders of nachos and a side of fries to tumble to the ground.

Everyone stops to see what happened, except for Lipschitz, who is scrambling out the door.

The parrot says, "Asshole."

Nobody laughs.

The parrot is being judgmental, and is only considering the man's actions from its own privileged heteronormative perspective.

* * *

Lipschitz returns the following night, and the night after that. Hour after hour he sits beside his beloved Laila, and she whispers funny things in his ear – stories, jokes, observations, none of which can be repeated here for obvious legal reasons.

He becomes quite good at holding in his laughter, and leaving calmly as if nothing afoul is afoot, but sometimes, on the way home, he recalls one of Laila's jokes, and he hears her voice in his head and he feels her breath on his ear, and he has to duck into an alley and bury his face in his coat in order to smother his riotous laughter.

Then, one night, as he returns home, his sister Sophie stops him. She examines his eyes, his face, his countenance.

"What have you been up to?" she demands.
"Where have you been?"

Lipschitz feels terror grow in his chest. Sophie is a fiercely devoted activist, with nothing but contempt for the brother who once made his living encouraging people to laugh at breasts and vaginas and penises and gender differences and the elderly with impaired cognitive functional abilities. She

||||| Lipschitz cannot answer.
||||| If he tries to speak at all,
||||| he will laugh. He waits,
||||| shakes his head, tries to
||||| settle himself. He thinks
||||| of horrors, of tragedies,
||||| of injustice

would love to make an example of him and he knows it.

"Nowhere," Lipschitz says.

"Then why is your face red?" she asks.

"It's cold out."

"It's seventy degrees. Were you laughing?"

"I was just running," he says, heading to his room. "It's late."

Lipschitz knows he is playing with fire, but he can't stop himself. His father, abusive and violent, died when he was eleven. His mother became bitter and controlling, his sister foul and resentful. Life went from dark to darker, and humour was the only coping mechanism young Lipschitz had, a thin but luminous ray of light through the otherwise suffocating blackness of his life. He imagined God on Day One, looking down at the world He had created, with all its suffering and heartbreak and death and pain and sorrow, and realising that mankind was never going to survive existence without something to ease the pain.

"Behold," declared God, "I shall give unto them laughter, and jokes, and punchlines and comedy clubs. Or the poor bastards won't survive the first month."

And so Lipschitz, despite the danger, returns to the pub again the following night, and he sits at the bar, beside a Russian, a Frenchman, two lesbians and a paedophile, and he waits for Laila to show up.

That's not funny, either. Singling out different nationalities only leads to contempt, and homosexuality has no relation to paedophilia.

After some time, the bartender approaches.
 “She’s not coming,” he says.
 “Why not?” asks Lipschitz.
 “Someone reported her.”
 Anger burns in Lipschitz.
 It was Sophie, he knows it.
 Lipschitz turns to leave, whereupon he finds
 two police officers waiting for him at the door. He
 is wanted for questioning. He must come down to
 the station.

“But I’m not going to drive drunk until later,”
 Lipschitz says.

Nobody laughs. Drunk-driving is a terrible
 crime that costs the lives of thousands of innocent
 people every year.

* * *

A witness in a Malicious Comedy case – two
 counts of Insolence, one count of Mild Hatred – is
 called to the stand.

The witness’s name is Lipschitz.

The defendant’s name is Laila.

Lipschitz takes the stand, and for the first time
 in weeks, his eyes meet hers. She smiles, and so
 great is the pain in his heart that he has to look
 away. Behind her, in the gallery, sit Lipschitz’s
 mother and sister, the bartender, the Russian, the
 Frenchmen, the two lesbians, the paedophile, the
 priest, the two cops, the rabbi and the nun with a
 parrot on her shoulder.

They scowl at him.

The prosecuting attorney approaches.

“Did you or did you not,” he asks Lipschitz,
 “on Thursday the last, discuss with the defendant
 the fate of two Jews who were stranded on a desert
 island?”

The audience gasps.

Lipschitz avoids making eye contact with Laila.
 If he does, he will laugh, and if he laughs, she will
 be found guilty. He fights back a smile.

“I did not,” says Lipschitz.

The prosecuting attorney steps closer.

“And did she not,” the prosecuting attorney
 demands, “on the Friday following, tell you what
 became of a Catholic, a Protestant and a Buddhist
 on the USS Titanic?”

Lipschitz wills himself to maintain his
 composure.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he sees Laila
 covering her own mouth, hiding her own smile,
 and he quickly looks away.

“She did not,” says Lipschitz.

The prosecuting attorney slams his fist on the
 witness stand.

“And did she not,” he shouts, “tell you of the
 elderly couple, one of whom has dementia and one
 of whom is incontinent? Was there no mention of
 them?”

Lipschitz cannot answer. If he tries to speak at
 all, he will laugh. He waits, shakes his head, tries
 to settle himself. He thinks of horrors, of tragedies,
 of injustice.

And then it happens.

Laila laughs.

She explodes with laughter, throwing her head
 back, her hand on her chest as if she might burst
 from joy.

“Order!” demands the judge.

Lipschitz begins to laugh, too. He laughs
 and laughs, and tears fill his eyes, and the judge
 bangs his gavel. He gets to his feet, furious at the
 outburst, but as he does, he steps on a banana
 peel and flips, head over heels, to the floor. The
 prosecuting attorney and bailiff rush to his aide,
 whereupon all three clunk heads and fall to the
 ground. Laila and Lipschitz laugh even harder,
 but the crowd does not. There’s nothing funny
 about head and neck injuries, which can cause
 cortical contusion and traumatic intracerebral
 hemorrhages.

“Guilty!” the judge yells as he holds his
 throbbing head. “Guilty!”

He clears the court, and orders Laila and
 Lipschitz taken away.

But later, when the bartender, the Russian, the
 Frenchmen, the two lesbians, the paedophile, the
 priest, the two cops, the rabbi and the nun meet at
 the pub, one and all swear they could still hear their
 laughter long after the courtroom was empty. ☒

*Shalom Auslander is an American novelist, essayist
 and short story writer. His latest novel Mother for
 Dinner was published in the USA in September 2020*