

But seriously, folks

Reviewed by Len Abram
Advocate correspondent

In a performance, comedians often change subject or tone by saying to the audience, "But seriously, folks." That's redundant. Comedy is already serious. It can be critical in dealing with life's inevitable disappointments and absurdities. In plays better known, but elsewhere too, comedy offers laughter as relief. In literature, Shakespeare uses a jester's comic relief to bring King Lear back to wisdom and sanity. In life, comedy can contribute toward a person's recovery from disasters, to continue.

Try analyzing a joke and you will kill it. Comedy is spontaneous, an expression of freedom. That's why it thrives in democracies. In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah both laugh at the Divine promise of their bearing a child in old age. When caught laughing over a lapse of faith, they are asked why they laughed. They are not forbidden to do so. To reaffirm its value, they name their child, the second patriarch of the Jewish people, after laughter.

As he lay ill, Shakespearean actor Edmund Keane quipped, "Dying is easy; comedy is hard." In stand-up comedy, described in David Grossman's "A Horse Walks into a Bar," the comedian is alone

on a stage, a few feet from the audience, as in a nightclub, with no prompter and no script, no recorded laugh track, nothing between the audience and the performer except jokes, talent and the mood of the crowd. Performers refer to failure as "bombing" and "dying." Jerry Seinfeld, a multi-millionaire, calls stand-up "self-torture," but he returns for its challenge and authenticity. Improvising means thinking on your feet, the matador facing the bull. Stand-up takes a kind of courage.

Grossman's Israeli stand-up comedian is Dovaleh or Dov Greenstein, middle aged, past his prime and in poor health. Our narrator is a retired jurist, whom Greenstein has invited to the show, as a friend from decades ago. A risky premise for a novel, Grossman's book is in effect one chapter and one setting, a nightclub in Netanya, and a comedian's approximately two-hour performance. Except for brief reminiscences from the narrator, Avishai Lazar, the novel is the show.

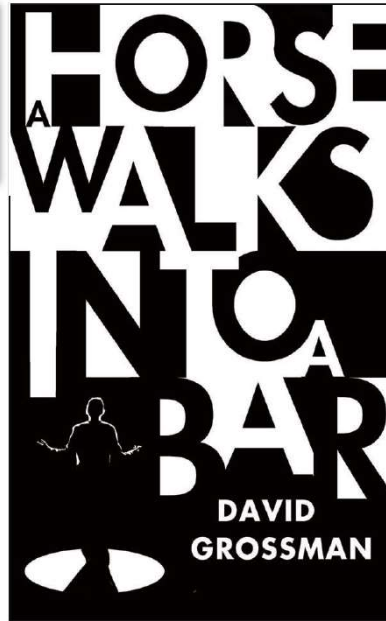
Lazar knew Dov Greenstein from their high school years, when they attended a summer camp in the Negev as preparation for the IDF, complete with tents, mess halls and target practice. That was long ago, and Lazar has

"A Horse Walks into a Bar," by David Grossman, translated by Jessica Cohen, Knopf, 2017

plenty of reasons to turn Greenstein down. What he remembers about their relationship as youngsters wasn't good. "I dislike the air he breathes," says Lazar of Greenstein, as he takes his seat in the audience. Lazar also doesn't like stand-up comedy, how everything is fair game for the comedian: people, ideals, country, whatever Lazar holds dear.

Greenstein is indeed profane (readers are warned) about sexual practices, conventional and exotic, and he salts his dialog with crude language (yes, the F-word) as he targets the icons of Israel, Israel's many problems, Jewish history, his audience, and of course himself. Self-deprecation is part of his shtick, a comic routine. Making fun of himself, for example, made comic Rodney Dangerfield famous.

Greenstein was the kind of kid — odd, unusual, or different, however described — who doesn't fit into a social hierarchy. Among his peers, he was ridiculed and bullied. He externalized his



alienation by walking on his hands. As a youngster, he did this when he was stressed. The upside-down view shows his tendency to see the world from another angle, which others on their feet seldom notice, a metaphor for point-of-view. Social critics and comedians see things differently, not wrongly, differently. As the son of a Holocaust survivor, Greenstein and his generation didn't have the leisure to take a year off to travel after the IDF, now nearly every "Overseas, for us, was strictly for extermination purposes," he says.

Greenstein ridicules politics left and right. He is sure that the lefties, as he calls them, with their tendency to regulate people's lives because they know better, have dismantled his summer camp in the Negev as too harsh. He refers to the infamous Baruch Goldstein and his massacre of Muslims in Hebron in 1994, as the "murd—oops, I mean saint," a comic Freudian slip. He enjoys deriding settlers for mistreating Arabs, but goes after Muslim fanatics as they wish death for the Jews in ancient, singsong pieties.

With the audience, he makes fun of individuals and even whole tables, how they apply makeup, when they text during his performance, what they wear. He disrupts — part of the game of power between the stand-up comedian and the audience. Greenstein "enjoys the confusion he sows." Shakespeare called the jokester the Lord of Misrule, comedy chaos. Tensions in the audience can be released through

anger or through laughter, perhaps at themselves. For the comedian, laughter is preferable (stand-up comedians have been punched while performing).

The narrator Lazar has his own problems with anger. His outbursts in court and his rulings overturned forced him into retirement. His anger may be at life. He has gone through a tragedy, what is irrevocable and cannot be undone, the death of his wife. His acceptance of Greenstein's invitation is an example of responding to a need Lazar doesn't even know is there.

The reason for audience hostility is that Greenstein, in describing a funeral, crosses the line between tragedy and comedy, spending too much time on the tragic side. Jokes about the Holocaust also abound, but this too has an authenticity because the comic's mother survived six months hidden in a Polish railroad car. Greenstein's comedy is in the parlance of his craft "edgy," meaning it skirts the edge of conventional taste and often crashes through it. For the performance, nothing is sacred, even the Israeli national anthem.

When the audience in Netanya is upset with Greenstein's sadness — they hadn't come for Yom Kippur, one complains — they yell, "Ixnay on the funerals already! Give us some life!" It is to life that the grieving Lazar, our Lazarus in the novel, returns, including his appetite for food and drink. He appreciates Dov Greenstein, the comedian, and the art of comedy.

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