



THE INSIDE STORY OF JEAN CARROLL, THE FIRST LADY OF LAUGHS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and a conversation with Professor Grace Kessler Overbeke. Grace Overbeke is an assistant professor in the Theater Department of Columbia College with a focus on comedy writing and performance. Her publications appear in the New England Theater Journal, Theater Survey, Studies in American Humor, and the Jewish Forward. She was the recipient of the Mark and Ruth Luckens International Prize in Jewish Thought and Culture and the Northwestern Crown Center Fellowship for Jewish and Israel Studies. Today we're going to discuss her book, *The First Lady of Laughs*, standing up for Jean Carroll, which won the 2022 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award and which is as delightful as it is thought provoking. Congratulations, Grace, on your recognition and thank you for joining us on the College Commons Podcast.

Grace Kessler Overbeke: Thank you and thank you for having me.

JH: Introduce us if you would to the broad strokes of Jean Carroll's life and the highlights of her career. Who is Jean Carroll in American popular culture?

GO: I think the broad strokes of Jean Carroll's life began probably with her immigration. Her father, as the story goes, was a defector from the Russian army and so he was caught and imprisoned around Paris. That is where Jean Carroll, as well as her two older sisters, were born. And by the time Jean Carroll arrived, her father was actually in the States already. He had been released from prison and gone to the United States to try to get a job and earn some money to send back to his wife so that she and her now three daughters could come over. So Jean Carroll arrived in the United States as a toddler and I think a high point is when she discovers theater. She says that she did it on a dare. I'll say this, Jean Carroll is a dramatic storyteller. So there are times when it is possible that she is embellishing or elaborating or the fish in the story, so to

speak, is a lot bigger than the fish that she actually caught. But as she tells it, her sister Mary was going to audition for a play. The school play was, I think, Peter Pan. And Mary said, I bet you won't audition with me 'cause you're too yellow.

GO: And so never one to turn down a challenge. Jean Carroll was like, I will audition. And she went and as the story goes, the teacher who was holding auditions didn't believe that she was reading the script for the first time. She is like, you must have studied this part. And Jean Carroll said, nope. She said, well, you're either a genius or a liar. And young Jean said, well, I don't know what a genius is, but I know I'm not a liar. So the teacher put a totally new script in front of her and she just knocked it out of the park. And the teacher was so impressed that she sort of personally saw to it that Jean Carroll, and by the way, her name is not really Jean Carroll. Her name is Celine Zeigman. But I'm just retroactively using her stage name 'cause that's what she tends to do. But this teacher saw to it that Celine Zeigman/Jean Carroll would get scholarships and dance training and voice training and all kinds of education that she really wouldn't have had access to otherwise. And that was sort of it. That was the moment that she got bitten by the bug and began to pursue this career in show business.

GO: She started at amateur nights. Amateur nights... I'm sad to say are not really a thing anymore, but at the time they were a way that kids in immigrant communities or poor communities could make their entrance into show business. And a lot of really famous people started in these amateur nights. Jean Carroll, of course, but also like Eddie Cantor and Fanny Brice. These amateur nights were a way that people could really show their talent. So she started doing them and she soon discovered that it wasn't exactly all that it was cracked up to be. The idea was that it was a bunch of local kids just getting on stage and doing their thing. And what she soon learned is that part of it was that, but a lot of it was staged. Basically, there were professional child actors being presented as local kids and the whole show was kind of a charade. So she threatens to break the illusion, go on stage and tell everybody that, you know, half the kids in the show are paid actors and it's all fake. And the stage manager rushes after and says, no, no, no, no, no, don't tell them, don't tell them.

GO: And she says, well, what will you give me to not tell them? And he said, you can come back and be part of the show and we'll give you a \$2 guarantee for every time you perform, whether you win or not. And she said, all right, good deal. Then as she tells it, she got noticed by a agent who ran, and this is gonna sound really shady, but a burlesque show for young girls. She was about 13, but I hope she was one of the younger of the girls. But this man and his wife went to her mom's house and tried to persuade her mother to let her youngest daughter come away with them to the burlesque circuit and they would make sure that she didn't get into trouble. And her mom agreed, which Jean Carroll says she was totally shocked by, but she said, well, you know, it was \$35 a week, which is a lot of money. And it came at a time when her family needed a lot of money. This is a major event in her life that is really sad. And you might think about it as like the formative event of her life.

GO: But when she was around between eight and 11, she saw her father attacking her mom. She talks about how he suffered from alcoholism and there were nights when he would just become really aggressive. And this one night he had come back from working really late and he took this steaming hot plate of food that Jean Carroll's mom, Anna, had made for him. And he just threw it across the room right at Anna. And Jean Carroll watched from through the window and she said he did it more than once. And she said that was the moment that she vowed to herself, this was going to change. She said that she saw it as an economic situation. Her mother was dependent on her father economically and she was trying to support these five kids. So Jean Carroll figured, well, if I can make more money than him, if I can be a provider, then I can be in control and we don't have to deal with him anymore. So that was really the motivating force, as she tells it, behind her going into show business professionally. It wasn't that she wanted to be a star or that she was even terribly drawn to show business.

GO: It was that she wanted to earn money. And at that point, that was what was going to make her money. So from then on, her career was remarkably successful. Major events would be the first time that she got onto the big time vaudeville stage. That was with a troupe called Midnight Rounders or the time that she left the performing troupes. And instead of being a singer and a dancer, she started doing comedy. She did it initially with partners. So she had a partner, Marty May, who was an old time, very successful vaudevillian. And they did a duo together called Marty May, Friend of Thousands, Annoyed by Jean Carroll. And then she left Marty May for another partner. This time it was both a show business partner and a life partner. Buddy Howe who was a dancer. And beyond being a dancer, he was a man who supported her desire to do comedy. He was very encouraging. She could write all of their routines. She could give herself all the punchlines, which she enjoyed very much. She could really take the kind of artistic control that she couldn't with Marty May. And it really allowed her to flourish.

GO: She and Buddy Howe became this superstar comedy act on vaudeville. They traveled all over. They went to England and they played the Palladium. They played the Palace Theater in the US. They did a tour on the USO. And it was a phenomenal act right up until World War II when Buddy Howe was drafted. And that was a big moment because that is when she stopped being half of the duo and started being a solo stand up comedian. When Buddy Howe went to war, Jean Carroll went to the microphone and she became what we would now call a stand up comic. She wasn't called that then. That was not really a word. But it was really exciting to watch her career kind of skyrocket. She became so popular that she was asked to do the Ed Sullivan Show almost 30 times. And for a while she even had her own TV show called Take It From Me. And it was a sitcom on ABC. And so those I think are the sort of big events in her life. I think she would be very upset that I did not include the birth of her daughter Helen. And so I'm gonna double back and say that one of the major events in her life is when she and Buddy Howe welcomes their first and only child, Helen.

GO: She loved being a mother. That I think is as much a part of her career as it is a part of her personal life that she was always sort of toggling between being a celebrity and a stand up superstar and being a mother.

JH: You write about her coded presence as an American acculturated Jew. She spoke with an accent and mannerisms that we readily instinctively hear as a New York Jew, at least sometimes. And she was almost like a female Billy Crystal, but her topics weren't explicitly Jewish. Is this what you mean by coded?

GO: It is. And I'm borrowing from Henry Bial, who wrote a fabulous book called *Acting Jewish*. And he talks about double coded performance as being performance that can be read as Jewish by a... In group audience, often a Jewish audience, whereas it's not explicitly Jewish. There's not Yiddish words or explicit references to Jewish customs or holidays. It's just coded so that people on the inside can recognize it. Even if someone who is totally unfamiliar with New York Ashkenazi Jewish culture would not read it in that way.

JH: And this was out of her perception of necessity or it was where she naturally went?

GO: That's a really interesting question. I don't know where she naturally went because I don't know her. I can say that being really familiar with this time period and the media norms and the social norms and the extreme prejudice, that I think that there was some professional necessity for her to not speak too much about her experiences as an immigrant, as a Jewish woman and try to make things to appeal to a waspier audience, which was very much then considered to be a universal audience.

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JH: The College Commons Podcast is proud to be part of HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. HUC Connect features four programs. Webinars, live conversations with social and cultural influencers on topics of civil society, arts and culture, religion, and redefining allyship. Community Connect, ready-made lesson plans for synagogue and community learning. The Master Class, live sessions of Judaica with HUC faculty exclusively for our alumni. Enroll soon because seats are limited. And of course, the College Commons Podcast, in-depth conversations with Judaism's leading thinkers. For more information about HUC Connect and all it has to offer, visit huc.edu/hucconnect And now, back to our program. You described the political importance of Jean Carroll's comedy as "less legible." Was this political importance that you cite more legible, more evident in her day than it may be for us looking back from our own point of reference? Or was it pretty not obvious even then?

GO: No, I think absolutely it was far more legible in her day. I mean, to the point that people called it revolutionary. Nobody talked about motherhood the way Jean Carroll did. I mean, the way that she was voicing a woman's point of view was really nothing that had been heard before. She was quite candid about the frustrations and the domestic bliss that was so revered and put on a pedestal at this moment was something that she had no qualms about puncturing and mocking. And at this point, you know, we have Ali Wong and we have Sarah Silverman and

we have Tig Notaro and we have so many women who are doing brilliant stand up and offering a wide variety of perspectives. But it hadn't happened before Jean Carroll.

JH: Which brings us to this interesting relationship she had with Buddy Howe. One of Carroll's signatures was to pick on her husband and her fellow performer Buddy Howe in her jokes, or at least she picked on the husbandly figure. And at the same time, Buddy Howe himself, as you describe him, openly recognized her talent as greater than his. From a feminist perspective, but also from a human interest perspective, what did you learn about Carroll in this regard?

GO: Here's the thing. Buddy Howe was his wife's biggest fan and he was also her manager. So when he came back from the war, he gained a major client. And it was through Jean Carroll's rise in fame and success that he gained more major clients. And through his wife's connection that he became extremely successful. So it complicates a narrative in which he is this kind of altruistic proto-feminist husband championing his partner because he is also benefiting deeply, socially, materially, in every sense, from her career. So there's a lot of different lessons that you can take away from their relationship. One might be that you should work with people who love you. But I don't know. I think that it's a complicated relationship to look at because they were co-workers and they were spouses. And sometimes I think they were more co-workers than spouses.

JH: And from her feminist perspective, what are we to make of the jokes that she so openly and persistently makes at his expense?

GO: Well, I think he always knew that they weren't really jokes about him...

JH: True.

GO: Maybe there was a seed of truth. But like when she jokes about her rotten kid, she's not actually talking about Helen. And when she jokes about her husband, who's so quiet that she took out life insurance out on him twice. That's not really Buddy Howe. That's a kind of fictional husband that, you know, there's always a little bit of distance between the butt of the joke and the man.

JH: You write about the subversive aspect of Carroll's humor. And I want to play a clip from 1955 that seems to subvert the subversion. The context is a routine dedicated largely to poking fun at the unromantic romances in her life with men. And up until then, she's sort of in a direct way subverting masculinity, at least as I hear her. But then she offers this transition, which appears to subvert in return her own posture as a conventionally respectable middle class woman. So I'm gonna play the clip and then we'll talk about it...

S3: Let me tell you something about this check. It's so funny the way I met him. You see I was standing on corner as usual and he walked by. Well I dropped my handkerchief he held it and picked it up.

JH: So there she is, she says, I was standing on a corner as usual. What's going on there in 1955, no less?

GO: She does flirt with what was then called blue humor, especially in like her nightclub acts. The sad thing about Jean Carroll, but really about like comedy from... In the 1930s, '40s through '50s, or even now, there are rarely legitimate recordings of what happens in nightclubs. So most of the material that Jean Carroll did was not going to be on the Ed Sullivan Show. It was going to be in bars and in nightclubs and in these places where frankly, you wouldn't get a laugh unless you were doing something a little risky or a little risqué. And so she does have the capability of like doing comedy that sort of tends towards the blue. So if she references, you know, being on a street corner or she said there was a man who asked her if she would join him for breakfast, he said, should I call you or nudge you?

GO: She has this whole sort of underground repertory of slightly risqué jokes that you're not going to hear on the Sullivan show. I've only heard them because there are bootleg recordings at the New York Public Library, but it's really one of the sadnesses of standup is that it's a medium like so much of theater where you kind of have to be there or you're just not going to get it.

JH: So we're talking showbiz here, which is a lot of fun and draws on our engagement with popular culture in really gratifying ways. No less so, however, your book is a work of scholarship and you use very sophisticated tools of analysis. And I want to ask you to crack open that experience for the benefit of our listeners and to tell us about the beauty of using ephemera, newspapers, advertisements, et cetera, as a tool for historical research and the particular magic of that kind of research, even though it's an admittedly more bookish approach.

GO: The ways that it's been put together had been a lot of like detective work, like going into archives and going into libraries and rooting around in old newspapers and trying to uncover everything that you can. Some of the most important pieces of this story came from Jean Carroll's personal scrapbook. So throughout her life, Jean Carroll was always keeping notices and reviews and clippings and photos, and she would even sometimes write marginalia to the sides. And I was able to see Jean Carroll's personal scrapbook, which was huge in trying to restore the story of her life and her world. And the other really important element was a documentary that sadly never got made, but Steven Silverman was working on this documentary about Jean Carroll called *I Made It Standing Up*. And for that documentary, he had collected hours and hours of interview footage. And so because of the care that he took in maintaining that story and that her granddaughter took in keeping her scrapbook, I mean, that's why we're able to hear this story. That's why I was able to write this book.

JH: What surprised you most about this research?

GO: I think what surprised me most about Jean Carroll was how little people knew about her and how very little people know about not just her, but so many women whose accomplishments are unquestionably historical. I mean, for every Jean Carroll, there are probably 10 more women whose stories never get told. And I think that was surprising, a little bit disheartening, but certainly motivating. I hope that this is part of a huge flood of recovered stories of women who have been not talked about very much.

JH: Give us your favorite Jean Carroll joke and if you're willing, in your best imitation.

GO: Oh, yes. So my husband loves this neighborhood. He says, where else can you get a three bedroom for this price? Plus it's quiet. The state is quiet. All you hear at night are a few calls for help.

JH: Thank you, Grace Kessler Overbeke. It's been a delight to talk to you and to celebrate Jean Carroll's life and career.

GO: Thank you.

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