

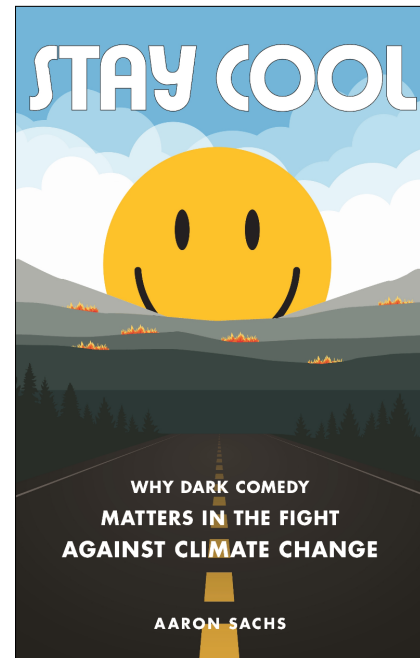
Aaron Sachs, **Stay Cool: Why Dark Comedy Matters in the Fight Against Climate Change**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 176 pp., \$22.00 (hardcover).

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We are all living amid a climate crisis. With rising temperatures, climate migration, sea level rise, and increasingly prevalent natural disasters, the impacts of climate change are pervasive, alarming, and already present. While people increasingly acknowledge the reality and urgency of climate change, systemic solutions are slow to come (Leiserowitz et al., 2023), and there is a prevalent doomist frame surrounding climate change, leaving us with a bleak collective outlook. Many of those concerned about climate change feel a sense of despair, hopelessness, and impending doom, especially younger adults (Hickman et al., 2021; Ojala, Cunsolo, Ogunbode, & Middleton, 2021). The situation is undeniably dark—but maybe we can use that.

In ***Stay Cool: Why Dark Comedy Matters in the Fight Against Climate Change***, historian Aaron Sachs argues for the crucial role of dark comedy in fighting and coping with climate change. By providing insight to the historical traditions of dark comedy for social change and for survival, Sachs shows that dark humor can generate solidarity and make the daunting reality of climate change a little more bearable. Sachs brings a wealth of examples to this argument, elucidating the evolution and cultural histories of dark comedy and gallows humor (finding lightness in the face of grim circumstance), as well as contemporary environmental comedy. The book has an abundance of humor and a simple message: It is better to be laughing.

Stay Cool opens with a historical survey of critical comedy, particularly outlining mid-century developments in satirical and self-deprecating comedy. Sachs contrasts the evolution of comedy with the environmental movement and, in particular, its propensity for humorlessness and self-righteousness. The author argues that environmentalists are perceived as overly serious, which alienates their audience and hinders the movement's influence. A key idea presented in this chapter is that self-deprecating humor—making fun of oneself, particularly before criticizing others—can make environmental messages more palatable and engaging. While Sachs does not deeply explore the mechanisms of this approach (*why does that work?*), he cites historical examples to demonstrate that it has been the case, regardless of *why* it is the case. Through these examples, including Sachs' own jokes, readers are able to see the possibilities of comedic strategy. Acknowledging one's own flaws can both lighten the audience's mood before they receive critique, and make it easier to critique others without coming off as self-righteous or morally superior. Ultimately, witty critique of the audience is a promising approach; other research, for example, has shown that highlighting hypocrisy is an effective strategy for attitude change (Bruneau, Kteily, & Falk, 2018).



In the following chapter, Sachs focuses on dark comedy and gallows humor, particularly the use of humor in the face of dire suffering as an age-old survival tool in marginalized communities. With a number of rich examples, he describes the history of gallows humor in both African American and Jewish culture, demonstrating gallows humor as a strategy to cope with hardship and injustice. Holocaust survivors, for instance, have recounted how humor helped maintain morale in concentration camps. Similarly, the Black and African American tradition of dark humor, rooted in experiences of slavery and oppression, has been a source of resilience and a subtle form of resistance. Sachs also explores dark comedy as a bridge between individuals and between communities. Native author Jessica Johns (2023) writes in her novel *Bad Cree*, "Sometimes laughter is less about what's funny, and more about letting someone know you understand, that you're in on the joke together" (p. 166). *Stay Cool* likewise describes that humor can offer a pathway to solidarity. The book draws parallels between these historical uses of dark humor and the contemporary struggle against climate change, suggesting that dark comedy can foster resilience and a sense of community amid this enduring tragedy that we are all subject to.

In its third chapter, *Stay Cool* addresses the emergence of environmental comedy, a relatively new genre that has gained traction as more people become aware of and increasingly distressed about climate change. The author seems to argue that dark genres of comedy naturally rise in dark times, and dark environmental comedy is no exception. This chapter explores the potential of comedy to support activism at various levels, from individual actions to global negotiations. Sachs points out that short video clips, memes, and other forms of modern communication can play a crucial role in raising awareness and inspiring action, in addition to naming the feelings of despair many already experience, giving us a way to find solidarity, direction, and a moment of relief in the midst of a looming global threat.

In the epilogue, Sachs introduces a distinct argument. He posits that "comfort" is a concept of modern making, and since humans have existed for centuries without it, we surely can adapt and prevail amid harrowing climate change, too. Ultimately, Sachs makes this point to urge readers to collect and share climate change jokes, lighten the mood, and simply make do. He acknowledges that while humor alone cannot solve climate change and is by no means an alternative to action, it can help people cope with its realities and maintain the fortitude to continue fighting for a better future.

Several particular forms of comedy are described throughout the text. Self-deprecating humor can help unravel the public image of the environmentalist as elitist, self-righteous, and scornful. By acknowledging their own flaws and shortcomings before offering critical commentary, activists can make their criticisms of others more palatable and foster greater empathy and openness from the audience. Gallows humor can bolster resilience and morale in the face of adversity. It helps individuals and communities cope with the harsh realities of climate change by providing a psychological release and a way to confront difficult truths without being overwhelmed by them. It creates a sense of solidarity and shared experience among those who face similar challenges. Satire uses irony, sarcasm, and ridicule to expose and criticize the absurdities or shortcomings of individuals, institutions, or society. Satirical humor can effectively highlight the hypocrisy and failings of those in power or those contributing to environmental problems. By doing so, it can challenge the status quo, spur critical thinking, and inspire action by making audiences more aware of issues and more motivated to address them.

Regarding medium, Sachs notes that digital media allows humor to be more easily shared. There is also evidence from other research that comedic information is more shareable and memorable than typical news forms (Coronel, O'Donnell, Pandey, Delli Carpini, & Falk 2021). Together, this suggests a synergy between comedic content and digital medium in increasing communication about climate change. Though not explicitly described in *Stay Cool*, utilizing contemporary media such as short videos can give currency to climate communication amidst an attention economy, while also allowing broader participation in *creating* environmental comedy.

Overall, Sachs offers a compelling breadth of cases in his effort to breathe humor into the environmental movement, both to revive its members, and also to enhance its influence. *Stay Cool* provides an engaging argument about the potential of comedy to make a significant impact in the fight against climate change. For anyone involved in environmental advocacy, this book is a resource that offers a fresh perspective on how to communicate more effectively and foster resilience in the face of adversity. Ultimately, Sachs uses historical and contemporary examples and plain axioms about the nature of humor to make his case: We are better off laughing than not, and if it gives us no solution, at least it will give us some relief.

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