

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Wit and Wisdom of the North

Rosemarie Jarski; Foreword by Stuart Maconie

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Ey up, it's not only footie, pints and pies that are better up north - the humour also takes some beating. Whether it's comics like Peter Kay, Les Dawson and Victoria Wood, telly shows like Corrie and Open All Hours, or writers like Alan Bennett and Keith Waterhouse, the funniest and best-loved invariably hail from the land of perpetual drizzle (another thing they do better).

This grand collection of northern wit is packed with these favourites and more. Likely lads and lippy lasses cast a wry eye on subjects close to the heart of every northerner, including - brass, grub, graft, courting, cricket, tittle-tattle and t'weather - adding up to a feast of northern hilarity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosemarie Jarski is a screenwriter dividing her time between Britain and the States. Her book publications include *Wisecracks and Hollywood Wit*, anthologies of on- and off-screen Hollywood quotations, a spoof guide *How to Be A Celebrity*, and the bestselling humorous quotations books; *The Funniest Thing You Never Said*, *Great British Wit* and *A Word from the Wise*.

Also by Rosemarie Jarski

Wisecracks and Hollywood Wit

How to Be A Celebrity

The Funniest Thing You Never Said

Great British Wit

A Word from the Wise

*The Wit and Wisdom
of The NORTH*

ROSEMARIE JARSKI



To Mum and Milena - Galapagos turtles both

The moral applies to the whole Kingdom of the North:
'Never ask a man if he comes from Yorkshire. If he
does, he will tell you without asking. If he does not,
why humiliate him?'

Roy Hattersley

Foreword

by Stuart Maconie

To misquote L.P. Hartley, 'The North is a foreign country, they do things differently there'. I expect the Bistro-ites of Islington and Brighton imagine that we do it in pelts and woad under lead grey skies whilst dying of diphtheria.

But no. While there is a strain of the northern psyche and imagination that is dark and mordant and brooding, we are also whimsical and romantic. We are elegiac and thoughtful. We are, above all, a right laugh - as I hope you will soon see.

Here you will find you are in the very best of company with some of the finest minds of this or any other generation; Morrissey, Alan Bennett, Jarvis Cocker, Victoria Wood, Mark E. Smith, Jeanette Winterson, Peter Tinniswood and more. Natural modesty forbids me from mentioning - oh, go on then - that there is even a nugget or two from myself in here, chiefly on matters of the gravest import such as chippies, Northern soul music and the Lancastrian fondness for the pastry savoury.

This is a book full of wry observation, thought-provoking insights and outright hilarity. Spending an hour or two in its company is bracing and educational. I myself learned many things and none more strange and wonderful than the fact that, according to Anthony Burgess, Graham Greene put carrots in his Lancashire hotpot. Burgess seems to have thought this an aberration but I consider it completely acceptable, *de rigeur* even.

And I like to think of our greatest novelist of Catholic guilt and forbidden sexual desire standing at the sink in an apron, dicing merrily, while the Bisto thickens on the stove.

Introduction

—Tell me, Eric, what would you and Ernie have been if you weren't comedians?

—Mike and Bernie Winters.

Interviewer and Eric Morecambe

Hello playmates!

It's thrilling to be invited to compile *The Wit and Wisdom of The North* not least because you know you're in for a lorra lorra laughs, but even a labour of love is not without its challenges. Northern Pride is at stake. You want to do justice to our rich comic heritage. You want to show us at our best. Let's be honest: you want to show those soft southern jessies who really rules the country when it comes to humour. To succeed, tough decisions must to be taken and important ground rules laid down.

First, define your territory. 'The North' is a movable feast, depending on your location, so an imaginary dividing line has to be drawn somewhere. I took the plunge in the River Trent (very bracing, lucky I took a towel), nominating Stoke-on-Trent as the official tollgate where vowels and caps start to flatten. Rest assured, the choice was determined by strict socio-geographical imperatives, taking into consideration historical and topographical boundaries dating back to William the Conqueror, and had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I have a cracking Robbie Williams quote. Honest.

Next, define your Northerner. Silly me thought it would simply be a matter of invoking the old Yorkshire cricket

team selection process and saying, 'If you were born in the North, you're a Northerner.' Which is fine till you discover that Caroline Aherne was born in London and John Prescott was born in Prestatyn, and how can you have a collection of Northern humour without two of its best comedians? Oh, for the days when all you had to do was spot somebody with mutton-chop whiskers, a pot-belly and a ferret down their trousers. (And it was just as easy to identify the men.)

If only there was a foolproof method of testing for a real Northerner, as there is for a real princess in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy story: Slip a mushy pea under their Slumberland and check next morning what sort of a night's sleep they had. 'Appen we could enquire if they prefer Tetley's or Earl Grey; say 'laff' or 'larf'; have meat pie crumbs round their mouth; support Manchester United (which, obviously would prove they're southern). A friend had a theory: 'Everyone in the North thinks Birmingham is in the South; everyone in the South thinks Birmingham is in the North.' First person I asked, 'Where's Birmingham?' replied, 'It's in the Midlands.'

Up the Mersey without a tickling stick, I asked myself the question I always ask in times of trouble: What would Ken Dodd do? 'By Jove, missus!' the Squire of Knotty Ash would say. 'Don't get discomknockerated! Open a jar of good old-fashioned Northern nous and apply liberally to the affected area.' So I did, and before you could say, 'tattifilarious', I had my ruling: If I say they're Northern, they're bloody well Northern and that's that. Like it or lump it.

If I inadvertently ascribe Northern nationality to any non-nationals, I apologise (blame Doddy), but trust they will accept the compliment in good grace and consider themselves honorary citizens at least between the covers of this volume.

Finally, define Northern humour. Give over! You're having a laugh! How do you define a reflex, something that

comes to us as naturally as drinking, I mean, blinking. In the North, a sense of humour is bred in the (funny) bone, hardwired into our folk DNA, and, as such, taken for granted. In fact, you only appreciate how special our humour is and how blessed we are to have it if you're lucky enough to be engaged on a project like this - or unlucky enough to cross the border.

Northern humour is, above all, the humour of recognition. Northern comedians don't try to be cleverer or smarter than us, they're inclusive rather than exclusive. Southern comics tell us how they got one over on someone; Northern comics tell us what a prat they made of themselves. There are no airs and graces, no attempts at one-upmanship. They're one of us.

But don't take my word for it. Dave Spikey, who's at the coalface of comedy, explains the differences:

My act is very northern... You get these comedians trying to be really right on and topical and they're all technically brilliant. And then I'll come on at the end and go, 'Ruddy Wigan, eh?' and the people all go, 'Whooahh, that's what we want, a bit of that!' There's a difference with northern comics. On stage it's like we're having a chat. With others you just get material, none of them in it.

What Dave Spikey has is that simple but elusive quality: warmth. Like charisma, it can't be bought, it can't be taught, but, by 'eck, it oozes from the pores of Northern comics like curry fumes after a takeaway vindaloo. Think of Les Dawson, Morecambe and Wise, Peter Kay, Johnny Vegas, Jason Manford, Jeff Green, Lee Mack, John Bishop, Ross Noble (how long d'you have?). We connect with these characters on an emotional level, making for a deeper, richer and, ultimately, funnier experience.

Sure, it's a cliché, but the big-hearted and friendly disposition of our comedians reflects the general nature of this part of the world, where people still talk to you at bus stops. ('Give us yer fuckin' mobile or I'll fuckin' deck yer!' is what they usually say, but, hey, you can't have everything.) Warmth is also built into the accent. 'If Father Christmas were to speak, he'd have a Northern accent - cosy, big and heartfelt,' according to Jenny Eclair. The Northern accent is easier on the ear than cockney, and more amenable to southern ears. Critic James Christopher described the voice of Wallace (Peter Sallis) in 'Wallace and Gromit' as 'a warm pair of slippers in an uncertain world'. Reassuring and reliable. J.B. Priestley reckoned that listening to the original Lancashire lass, Gracie Fields, for just fifteen minutes would tell you more about Lancashire women and Lancashire than a dozen books on the subjects. 'All the qualities are there,' he asserted, 'shrewdness, homely simplicity, irony, fierce independence, an impish delight in mocking whatever is thought to be affected and pretentious.' That goes for the rest of the North too.

A keen ear for dialogue is essential in the comedy of recognition, and one humorist supremely skilled at capturing the peculiar rhythms of Northern speech was Peter Tinniswood. He was born in Liverpool, but grew up in Sale in Greater Manchester where he lived with his mum above a dry-cleaner's. He used to sit under the counter among the dirty laundry and eavesdrop on the conversations in the shop. 'It was like live radio,' he explained. 'It sharpened my ear for dialogue...I became a good mimic.'

What makes the dialogue of Peter Tinniswood so resonant is an authenticity borne of the writer's deep identification with his homeland. The poet, Roy Fisher, has said of his own birthplace in the Midlands, 'Birmingham's what I think with'. The North's what Peter Tinniswood thought with. And he was passionate about it. That love

found its greatest expression in the character of Uncle Mort, the dour, lugubrious hero of a series of novels, who was brought memorably to life by Robin Bailey in the television series, *I Didn't Know You Cared*.

As a comic creation, Uncle Mort eclipses Basil Fawlty, Del Boy Trotter and Norman Stanley Fletcher, and ranks alongside Falstaff, Mr Pickwick and Homer Simpson. Who else owns an allotment on which he cultivates only weeds and hoists a flag whenever he is in residence? Who else asks questions like, 'Do you think the Holy Ghost could play for Yorkshire if it could be proved he were born in Sheffield?' And who else, given the news he has cancer, says to his brother-in-law, on their way to the pub, 'Don't mention owt about my impending fatality. I don't want no one thinking I'm trying to be a bloody show-off.'

Uncle Mort is the living embodiment of the North: 'His mind is a rag-bag of folk memories and lovingly nurtured prejudices, and from his unstoppable mouth flows a kind of comic version of the North's collective unconscious,' writes critic Glyn Turton. Mort belonged to the generation that created the popular idea of the North. They were proper heroes who suffered privations we cannot begin to imagine and fought two world wars to give us the freedom we now take for granted. Uncle Mort's beloved open-top trams, condensed milk sandwiches and cloth cap may now be sacred relics consigned to the mythology of the North, but his spirit lives on: grit, guts, gumption and grumpiness - all that's grand about the Northern character.

Mort is timeless, but also of his time, espousing views that would make Germaine Greer turn in her grave - if she were dead. For example, his idea of t'perfect woman is 'a bloke with big knockers' and he can only countenance a Heaven that is 'men-only'. Sexism is an accusation regularly levelled at the humour of the North and, as home to Andy Capp, Roy 'Chubby' Brown and *Viz* magazine, it's a tough charge to defend. You might argue, these mirth-

makers are merely mirroring reality: the North is still a stronghold of the Unreconstructed Male. Metrosexuals have yet to catch on in Barnsley. Male moisturiser does not fly off the shelves of Superdrug in Scunthorpe. And any battle of the sexes is, by definition, going to be sexist. If all the material that might be deemed politically incorrect had been censored, this would have been a shorter, duller and less truthful book. Judgements were made in accordance with regulations laid down by Graham Dury, the *Viz* cartoonist who invented 'The Fat Slags': 'We never like upsetting people. If something goes in, it's got to be funnier than it is offensive.'

One comedian unjustly tarred with the 'sexist' brush was Les Dawson. As king of the mother-in-law joke, he caught the full force of the Feminist onslaught. But he put up a cogent and compelling defence (and still managed to slip a few gags in):

Surely no one could take my remarks seriously. When I say my mother-in-law is a decoy for whaling ships, that her skin is stretched so tightly that when she bends her knees her eyelids fly open, I mean, come on... It's cartoon imagery. It's a lampoon. It's basically affection, anyway. I don't pull anything to pieces that I don't like. Things I don't like, I ignore. Things I'm fond of, I make fun of.

Les grew up in working-class Collyhurst surrounded by women, with an 'auntie' on every street. Women were the glue that held communities together. Northern women were a breed apart. Alan Bennett describes their evolution: 'They have come down by a separate genetic route and like the Galapagos turtles (whom some of them resemble) they have developed their own characteristics.' So, what might those characteristics be - apart from scaly skin and a rock-hard shell? Stoicism, pragmatism, resilience, self-reliance

and resourcefulness - Northern women are born copers. As an Alan Bennett lass puts it: 'I could probably deliver a baby if I was ever called upon and I can administer an enema at a moment's notice.'

And they can deliver a quip and administer a rebuke even faster! Men rarely get the better of women in the Northern war of words; they're outwitted, outsmarted and outfoxed. According to the *London Review of Books*: 'Women do most of the talking in northern plays, men in London-based plays'. The fair sex certainly nab the lion's share of the lines in Northern soap operas. The success and longevity of *Coronation Street* is largely down to the consistently strong female characters who have stalked the cobbles down its long history, from Ena Sharples to Blanche Hunt. By all accounts, Violet Carson, who played Ena, the hair-netted harridan, was just as formidable in real life. She once introduced herself to a new director on set with the words: 'My name is Violet Carson and my train leaves at five o'clock.' The Witches of Weatherfield epitomise what Les Dawson calls the 'doorstep doyennes in bright aprons, arms akimbo as they pass judgement on the neighbourhood morality'. A few more like them on our streets today and we'd soon solve the scourge of the hoodie.

Northern women speak as they find; they have licence to say things their male counterparts couldn't get away with. Which explains (though only in part, mind), why so many male Northern comics can't wait to slip a hairy leg into a pair of lady's fishnets. Steve Coogan's female alter ego is Pauline Calf, displaying pins so shapely that many red-blooded males confess to fancying her/him. Paul O'Grady is the brassy blonde bombsite, Lily Savage. And then there's the unforgettable double act of Roy Barraclough and Les Dawson as Cissie Braithwaite and Ada Shufflebottom.

Les was a consummate pantomime dame and fan of musical-hall star Norman Evans on whose *Over the Garden*

Wall character he based Ada. He revelled in the part of the coarse old crone, hoisting his huge prosthetic bosoms in fidgety awkwardness as he discussed his/her problems 'down there' and mouthed the unmentionable words. (Btw - the verb to describe this action is 'mee-maw'. It derives from the exaggerated expressions of workers in the cotton mills to make themselves understood over the noise of the machinery. Even when the cotton mills closed down, the practice continued. You can see it in 'Wallace and Gromit', in the way Wallace enunciates his words with slow and deliberate precision: 'CHEEEEEEESE, GROMIT...') Drag acts are still popular today, and the latest incarnations of Cissie and Ada appear on TV's *Loose Women* in the forms of Coleen Nolan and Jane McDonald, though, if you ask me, their prosthetic bosoms are way too big to be convincing.

In a male-dominated field like comedy, it is a rare treat to be able to include so many first-rate female wits. There was no question of filling quotas; admission was entirely on merit. What a bubbling hotpot of Norsewomen, including Jenny Eclair, Caroline Aherne, Nancy Banks-Smith, Beryl Bainbridge, Maureen Lipman, Carla Lane and the jewel in the crown - or should that be the currant in the Chorley cake - Victoria Wood.

Nobody has done more to swell collective pride in our comic tradition than this Prestwich-born comedian and writer. She blazed a trail for female stand-ups after the sadly premature death of Marti Caine from leukaemia ('I'm a lymphomaniac,' she quipped after her diagnosis). Victoria Wood has never played the Northern card; indeed, she resists labelling: 'There are a few professional Northerners about and I'm trying not to be one of them.' In her work, she often pokes fun at the Hovis ad image of the North. But her sensibility is unequivocally Northern, she hasn't lost her amiable Lancastrian tones and she still speaks fondly of her roots. She gives a voice to all middle-aged women who, like older people, are marginalised and ignored by a society

obsessed with youth and celebrity. As she grows older, her stand-up routines grow bolder, darker, more up-close and personal – and even funnier.

In common with many Northern wits, Victoria Wood is adept at spinning comic gold out of pain and misery. Laughter and tears are never far apart in Northern Life. Plenty of writers can make you laugh, then make you cry, but only the very best can make you laugh and cry at the same time. Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash regularly wring tears of both laughter and sadness out of their classic slice of Northern working-class life, *The Royle Family* (ably assisted by a sterling cast). In ‘The Queen of Sheba’, the episode dealing with the death of Nana, comedy and tragedy are held in perfect harmony without ever lapsing into sentimentality. After Nana’s funeral, skinflint Jim Royle, who enjoyed a prickly relationship with his mother-in-law, speaks a line that betrays all his latent fondness: ‘I’d give all the bloody money in the world to ‘ave one more bloody row with ‘er.’ Hilarious *and* heartbreaking.

The paradoxical propensity to couch affection in abuse is a distinctly Northern trait. ‘I think there’s a Northern sensibility that involves humour and directness,’ says Lee Hall, writer of *Billy Elliot*. ‘When you’re up north you realise that it’s a term of affection to call somebody a bastard.’ W.R. Mitchell, renowned former editor of *The Dalesman*, notes a conversation he once heard ‘that began with what a stranger would take to be offensive but, in the context of Yorkshire farmers, was affectionate, “Na then, you miserable owd bugger...”’ Instead of using players’ first names, football manager Brian Clough used to call them, ‘Shithouse’ – ‘it’s an affectionate term,’ he maintained. And I’m reminded of a bloke approaching Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown after a show up North, brandishing a programme to be autographed. ‘It’s for me sister,’ he explained. ‘Can you put: “To Joanne, you fat cunt”.’ Ah, there’s nowt like sibling love.

What *are* we like? What the holy flamin' hecky plonk must other people make of us? Well, you can pick up a few insights because scattered in amongst the pearls of wit and wisdom from our own kith and kin is the odd gem furnished by offcomers (identified as such by an 'F' for 'Foreigner' - what else? - after their name in the credits). They shine a light on aspects of our character and homeland we ourselves may be too close to pick up on. They also show what bloody good sports we are to be able to take criticism from outside. Chip on our shoulder, us? Nah, more like a full fish-and-chip supper - wi' gravy.

This collection may not bridge the Watford Gap, but any joshing at the expense of our southern cousins is good-natured and laughter-lovers from both sides of the divide are welcomed. Non-Northerners may take a moment or two to acclimatise to the regional voice but familiar themes such as debt, disease and death should make them feel right at home. For, in the end, Northernness is less a matter of geography than it is a state of mind. It's a mindset in which humour plays a crucial if not defining role. So, get a brew on, kick off yer clogs and get stuck in. There hasn't been such glee since the famous lock-in at the Rovers of '76 when it's rumoured Ena Sharples, sozzled on stout, showed Albert Tatlock what she kept under her hairnet. By the 'eck, the pair of 'em staggered out of the snug looking chuffed to little mint balls. As, it's hoped, will you be.

Ay thang yew!

Character

Doorstep Doyennes: Strong Women

I came home about two o'clock in the morning on Thursday, and she's stood behind the front door with a rolling pin. I said, 'You're never up at this time baking, are you?'

Roy 'Chubby' Brown

This is God's number-one area for unpleasant women of strong character.

Norman Clegg, *Last of the Summer Wine*

—She were a cold woman, was your Edna. Whenever she was around, it always seemed like the second week in January.

—Aye, that's why I never 'ad much success with me indoor tomatoes.

Les Brandon and Uncle Mort, *I Didn't Know You Cared*

My nan was a very fiery lady, always kicking off... My grandad never got into it...he'd stay silent and tap his foot. And when he got told off for that, he'd go outside and look at his peaches.

Wayne Hemingway

Thelma's mother's arrived. She's wearing that smile of hers - like she's about to unveil the new wing of an abattoir.

Terry Collier, *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?*

I once asked my grandma for a biscuit, and she just looked at me and said: 'If we 'ad some 'am, we could 'ave 'am and eggs, but we've no eggs,' and that's me told.

Lucy Mangan (F)

—But, Prime Minister...

—Don't 'but' me, young man...

Margaret Thatcher and Stephen Bayley

Her mouth was like a drawstring bag. You suddenly realised the provenance of the word 'pursed'.

Nancy Banks-Smith

She's that hard faced, if she fell on the pavement she'd crack a flag.

Vera Duckworth, *Coronation Street*

You could fire a bazooka at her and inflict three large holes. Still she kept on coming.

Roy Hattersley, on Margaret Thatcher

I'm what they call in the Hollywood films, 'a dangerous woman'. Barbara Stanwyck could do a picture about me.

Blanche Hunt, *Coronation Street*

—It's only Nora Batty. Despite appearances, she's only human.

—Rubbish. She's legendary.

—If she was in a chariot, you wouldn't be able to move for fleeing Romans!

Seymour Utterthwaite, Wesley Pegden and Norman Clegg,
Last of the Summer Wine

—Go on, make fun of a weak and vulnerable woman.

—I've seen men with balaclavas and sawn-off shotguns more vulnerable than you.

Eileen Grimshaw and Blanche Hunt, *Coronation Street*

Maybe it's because I'm a bolshie-minded Scouser, as my husband would say, that I wanted to stand up for myself.

Cherie Blair

A woman is like a teabag. You never know how strong she is until you put her in hot water.

Natasha Blakeman, *Coronation Street*

Last Of The Summer Whiners: Grumpiness

—Nice bloke, that.

—I thought he was very rude - right gruff, right terse, right dour and grumpy.

—That's what I said, nice bloke.

Carter Brandon and Pat Partington, *I Didn't Know You Cared*

To a good West Riding type there is something shameful about praise, that soft Southern trick. But fault-finding and blame are constant and hearty.

J.B. Priestley

I've always been a pessimist. I like the thought of being some kind of depressive drunk, smoking opium like some old poet. That's very appealing.

Michael Parkinson

I have always been a grumbler... Probably I arrived here a malcontent, convinced that I had been sent to the wrong planet... I was designed for the part, for I have a sagging

face, a weighty underlip, what I am told is 'a saurian eye', and a rumbling but resonant voice from which it is difficult to escape. Money could not buy a better grumbling outfit.

J.B. Priestley

Women tend to be more personal in their grumping. They tend to react from the gut and the heart, so it's about their home life, their personal looks, their friendships. Men get all huffy and puffy about daft things like football.

Jenny Eclair

He had a tendency to attach far greater significance than was reasonable to the most minor of irritations - light-switches left on, drinks left undrunk, that kind of thing. He also had an absurdly acute sense of smell, which led to a situation whereby we had to leave the house to put on our deodorant.

William, Alexandra, Tom and Florence on their dad, John Peel, read out at his memorial service

Pessimism, when you get used to it, is just as agreeable as optimism.

Arnold Bennett

I am a life-enhancing pessimist.

J.B. Priestley

No Better Than She Ought To Be: Tarts with Hearts

Here she comes. Catherine of all the bleedin' Russias!

Tony Warren, greeting a fur-clad Pat Phoenix

Skirt no bigger than a belt, too much eyeliner, and roots as dark as her soul!

Blanche Hunt, on Liz McDonald, *Coronation Street*

She's twopenn'orth of God-'elp-us wrapped up in a wet 'Echo'.

Scouse saying

[*Bet is leaning provocatively over the bar*] That Vera. She shoves it all in t'front window, don't she?

Bet Lynch, *Coronation Street*

Hold yer tongue and put that bosom away when you talk to me, young lady!

Great Aunt Mona, *I Didn't Know You Cared*

She won't wear anything approaching a brassiere - when she plays ping-pong it puts you in mind of something thought up by Barnes Wallis.

Kitty, *Victoria Wood, As Seen on TV*

I can't abide women with big busts. In my day, young women didn't 'ave busts; they 'ad modesty. They waited till they was married before they 'ad big busts.

Great Aunt Mona, *I Didn't Know You Cared*

[*Bet is showing Hilda her low-cut dress*] —By 'eck, it's got a low back 'asn't it?

—That's the front!

—Yer wha'? It's a wonder you don't catch yer death.

—I don't feel cold, Petal. When I wear necklines like that, the temperature round me shoots up to near tropical.

Hilda Ogden and Bet Lynch, *Coronation Street*