From Sketches to Standup: Comedy that Makes a Difference

Michael Bunn
Associate Professor (Teaching) of Writing, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, & Sciences
Arts & Humanities

Abstract
In this seminar we will attempt to understand how being humorous allows authors and comics to tackle subjects in their work that might otherwise seem taboo, and how this freedom provides a unique opportunity for social commentary and critique. We will pay particular attention to how comedic authors balance the need to entertain an audience with their efforts to provide insight on controversial issues. We will discuss the criteria for an effective "comedic critique" by looking at contemporary examples from sketch shows like Saturday Night Live or Key & Peele, as well as segments of a standup routines from comedians such as Bill Burr and Ali Wong. We will examine how comedy allows for the discussion of controversial issues and explore where the line resides between effective critique and offensive material. In addition to providing an entertaining look at how comedians critique society, this micro-seminar will introduce students to some of the critical reading skills that they will be asked to employ throughout their coursework at USC.

Faculty Biography
Dr. Michael Bunn is an Associate Professor (Teaching) of Writing in the USC Writing Program and regularly teaches first-year students in WRIT 150 and GESM 110. He also offers an upper-level WRIT 440 course titled "Writing Comedy as Social Commentary". He has embarrassed himself on more than one occasion performing standup comedy in Los Angeles.