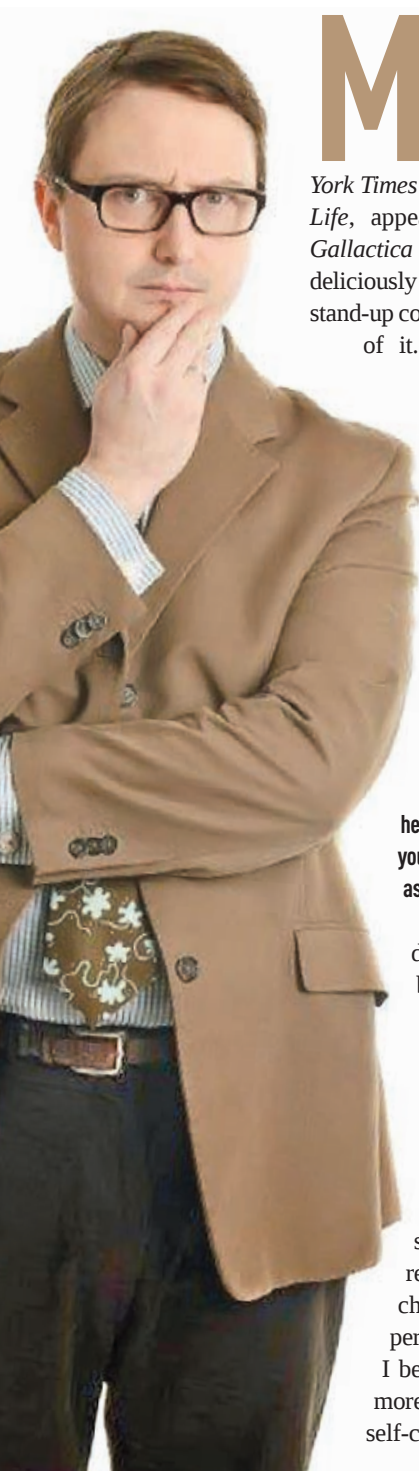


# NOT THE NERD TABLE

The dapper literary humorist and comedian reflects on writing, the mystery of laughter and high school



**M**ustachioed Renaissance man John Hodgman has accomplished pretty much everything a nerd-dandy could ever want: doling out advice for *McSweeney's*, serving as humor editor for *The New York Times Magazine*, contributing to *This American Life*, appearing on *The Daily Show*, *Battlestar Galactica* and *Community*, and writing a trilogy of deliciously fictional almanacs. Now, he takes on stand-up comedy, or his own esoteric, foppish version of it. *EW* caught up with him before his “upcoming physical manifestation” at the McDonald Theatre March 8.

#### Have you been to Eugene before?

I've never been to Eugene, and I've always wanted to go. I've been to Portland like all other humans. But I've been hearing about Eugene, Ore., for years and years and years ... Everyone I know has an ex-girlfriend that still lives there.

Marc Maron's show got canceled, and Eugene was pretty bummed, but now you're coming. I heard you on Marc Maron's *WTF* podcast recently and you guys were talking about how you define yourself as a literary humorist rather than a comedian?

That's what I say, but the way I really define myself is as a guy that does not blow Oregon off, unlike Marc Maron, apparently.

#### Thank you.

[Laughs.] No, I'm sure that Marc had pressing circumstances ... The way I think I described it on Marc Maron was “wry chuckles for the arched eyebrows set,” as opposed to audible laughter for regular humans. And that really had to change dramatically once I started performing on *The Daily Show* and then live. I began to realize that producing laughter is more pleasurable for everyone than producing self-congratulatory smirks.

#### What's harder? Being funny in print or while performing?

Being funny on stage is harder. That's the much bigger challenge, because being funny in print, you are not there to hear yourself bomb. It was a really interesting transition from being a writer to being a live performer because you can construct a joke and it might not produce audible laughter, and, how often, honestly, are you laughing out loud regularly at, you know, a newspaper column? Unless you're schizophrenic, you don't laugh out loud often on the subway while reading. So you can construct a joke that might not produce audible laughter but at least the person reading it might appreciate it: “That's a well-constructed joke, I see what he's saying there.” You know what I mean?

Whereas when you are in a room with other humans — your job if you are a comedian — you might be speaking some of the finest crafted sentences in the world and performing them with incredible skill, but you have a job, which is to produce a single, mysterious human emotion or I should say, a single mysterious human reaction, which is audible laughter. That's something that one becomes quickly obsessed with because we really don't understand laughter.

There are those who try to explain why jokes work, but those people are the least funny people in the world and they make everyone feel bad. The thing that produces laughter, we have no biological reason to laugh, more than we have a biological reason to scream, and the two are kind of connected to each other. I guess what I'm saying is, that if you people aren't laughing when I see you in Eugene, I will make you scream.

#### Do you prefer performing now to writing or do you like wearing many hats?

I've always worn many hats, and also many cloaks for some reason. [Laughs.] And I have a very large collection of silver-tipped canes. So I am something of a dandy, it is true. In some ways I do prefer performing to writing because performing is over faster and it is more socially acceptable to drink at the end. Writing is a longer process because no one is waiting for what you are doing, no one is waiting for what you have to say and when you finish it, and you

have a glass of whiskey by yourself, it is sad.

Either way, it's all something I sadly will never escape, which is the impulse to tell stories and construct reality into beginnings, middles and ends — whether that's writing on the page for laughter or for not, or telling a story on stage for laughter or for not, that's the curse. Once you start seeing the world that way you can't stop...

#### In the high school cafeteria of your life, would you sit at the writer's table or would you sit at the comedian's table?

Why is high school so awful? [Laughs.] Why do I have to choose? I'm not in high school anymore. You know what I mean?

#### Yep, you're not in high school anymore. It's over.

The pleasure of not being in high school is you get to sit wherever you want ... You get to create your own table. That got profound quick. The reality was, really, in high school, those were not the divisions, you might be surprised to learn; we did not have a table for comedians and then a table for short story writers. We had tables for the sort of super popular, attractive people — I won't even say the jocks — like the *really* attractive people. Then we had the table for, in this case I will say the nerds, and I sat at neither table. I sat in the neurotic middle. The people who were not terribly athletic or attractive or beautiful, but too full of themselves to align with those kids sitting playing weird card games and wearing leather vests at the nerd table. We were the lonely ones. Because you would look over at the attractive people, you know they were making out every weekend, and then you look over at the nerds, and they were practically doing it in the cafeteria and we were sort of chastely holding hands not knowing where we belonged — I'm not speaking figuratively, the nerds were sexually active. Have you ever been to a Ren Fair? It is a white-hot golden goblet of mead and hormones. It is serious stuff. There is a lot of jousting going on. ■

To read the full interview, including John Hodgman's thoughts on success, his books and his favorite comedians, visit our website. John Hodgman performs 7 pm Friday, March 8, at McDonald Theatre; \$27-\$32. Students who present student ID at the McDonald ticket window can get two tickets for the price of one.

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