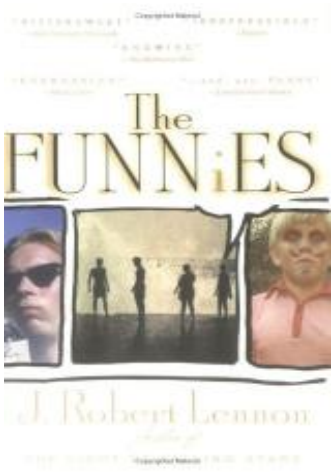
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The Funnies

by J. Robert Lennon



About the Book

As often poignant and insightful on the subject of sibling relations as it is laugh-out-loud hilarious, **The Funnies** is a bittersweet comedy that tells the story of the Mix family?a dysfunctional, semi-estranged brood forever immortalized as wisecracking imps in their father's nationally syndicated "Family Circus"-esque comic strip. When their cartoonist dad dies, his estate is divided among four of his five children. Instead of a cushiony bank account, Tim Mix, a struggling artist and our narrator, is given three months to learn to draw the strip. If he succeeds (which means selling out), he will have inherited a gold mine; if he fails, he will get nothing. As in his first novel, Lennon brings to life a wide range of characters who ring true at every turn?from Dot Mix, the matriarch whose alcohol-induced senility means she only occasionally recognizes members of her brood, to Pierce Mix, the family's black sheep and its youngest member who never made it into the strip and has been clinically depressed ever since. The deeply odd world of syndicated cartoonists is used to full effect on these pages, as is Lennon's gift for creating, in the words of **The New Yorker**, "psychologically nuanced, richly detailed, and unexpectedly comic" situations. **The Funnies**marks a bright and brilliant leap forward for one of our most imaginative and gifted young writers.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think Tim Mix is correct in his conjecture: "Maybe Dad conceived of [The Family Funnies] as a way to control us" (p. 8)? Why did Carl Mix's comic strip never evolve? Was this stasis an act of sentimentality on his father's part, as Tim believes?"a laborious, obsessive endless act of will" (p. 209)? Or do you feel something else drove Carl to keep his children's comic strip selves "forever prepubescent, compassionate and cute" (p. 7)?

2. Tim calls Riverbank's FunnyFest "a small community's flailing attempt to invent a history to supplant the actual one" (p. 29). How do the history and evolution of Riverbank mirror those of the Mix family? Have Mayor Francobolli and the town's citizens learned, as the Mix children have, to keep their expectations low? Is Carl Mix enough of a celebrity for

his town, or does Riverbank share Tim's disappointment that, "He wasn't the father I wished I had, but all I had nonetheless" (pp. 23-24)? How has Riverbank changed by the novel's conclusion?

3. How does the revelation about Pierce and Uncle Mal affect your understanding of all that occurs previously in the novel? Is Tim correct that Pierce's absence from the comic strip "stood for all the other [conflicts] in the family" (p. 17)? What does Pierce mean when, hearing Tim's envy that Pierce was never part of the strip, he replies, "You're not looking hard enough. I'm in every one of them" (p. 180)?

4. At the novel's onset, each of the Mix siblings seems to have 'inherited' a tendency to form unhealthy romantic attachments. Do you have any hope for the future happiness of any of these characters by the end of the story? Which ones, and why? Will some remain unhappily stuck in their relationships? Which ones, and why?

5. Why does it seem to Tim that Bitty has always had a different father than the rest of his siblings? Given what we discover about Pierce and Uncle Mal, why is this impression particularly ironic? Was Bitty's birth order in the Mix family a 'blessing' or a 'curse'? Why do you think she marries Mike Maas, and why does their marriage become unstable?

6. What is Catholicism's role in the Mix family? Does it play a different part in the world of The Family Funnies? What does Tim mean by his assertion, "The church cartoons were a crock" (p. 19)? Do you think his father felt the same way?

7. Carl once confided to Tim that he "dreamt only in diffused light, that nothing in a perfect world would cast sharp shadows" (p. 30). How were these shadows revealed in his work? Were they important to its success? How does Carl's explanation of light help to explain his alcoholism? His blank glasses in his comic self-portraiture? Why is Tim so affected by the discovery of Carl's drawing of Lindy's bare body, filled with her skeleton (pp. 61-62)? 8. Why is Tim unable to understand his father until he sits down, literally, in his place? At the moment he think, "Poor Dad" (p. 60), how does his life begin to change? How does Tim's empathy affect the rest of the Mix family? Why was such empathy impossible in Carl's lifetime?

8. The night following the reading of Carl's will, Tim has a disturbing dream about Amanda (pp. 54-55). What does this dream reveal about Tim's feelings toward Amanda and about his anxieties in general? Why does it motivate him to call Susan in her office and to agree to draw the strip? What does Susan offer Tim that Amanda cannot? Do you think Tim and Susan's relationship is good for Tim? Why, or why not? What effect does Tim's losing the strip have on their lives?

9. How did reading The Funnies affect your attitudes toward and understanding of comic strip art? Discuss your reactions to the participants and events of the book's comic strip conference. Were you surprised to encounter such a dark side to the business of humor?

10. In one of Tim's mother's rare moments of lucidity, she begs him, "Don't make me out to be the simpleton your father did" (p. 70). What did The Family Funnies do to her? In your opinion, is her relationship with Uncle Mal a positive or a negative force (or both?) in her life? What do Carl's drawings of Dot's naked body reveal about his feelings for her? Do the drawings make the discovery of Carl's philandering more or less surprising? Why do these pictures ultimately cause Tim to pity his father?

11. How does finding Carl's installation art at the storage facility contribute to Tim's understanding of his father? How are these two artists alike? How are they different? Why is it significant that Pierce and Mal are included in this secret

installation? Why do you think Carl wanted Pierce to find it?

12. Much of THE FUNNIES is about the inescapable influence of legacy and inheritances, both financial and emotional? What do you think the author is saying about the importance of family legacies, whether they're pleasant ones or not?

13. The other cartoonists Tim meets at the convention all seem?at least superficially?to identify with their own characters. What does Carl Mix's apparent contrasting relationships with his cartoon family and his real family say about an artist's relation to his work? Do you think Lennon is commenting on a kind of artistic schizophrenia?

14. When Tim and Susan first meet, at Carl's funeral, Tim thanks Susan for not calling his father a "great man." Although Carl is a beloved cartoonist, he had few friends in real life. Do you think it's fair to judge artists by their personal shortcomings, or should history remember them only for their artistic creations?

15. Through "The Family Funnies" and Tim Mix's grandfather's "Who's Dat Kitty?", Lennon shows us how cartoon are as much social commentary as entertainment, and how they often mirror mainstream America's lives. What might Carl Mix have been trying to say through his idealized family? Was it a fantasy? A romantic vision? Or might "The Family Funnies" be something more wistful?a hope for a family he knew he'd failed to raise and shape in real life? Or to put it differently, do you think Carl Mix's family fell apart in response to pressures created by the idyllic image of the cartoon family, or did Carl Mix create that family in response to his less-than ideal family? What do you think J. Robert Lennon is saying about the depiction of the American family in popular culture, given the discrepancies between the Mix family and their alter egos?

Author Bio

J. Robert Lennon is the author of three story collections and 11 novels, including BUZZ KILL, SUBDIVISION and BROKEN RIVER. He holds an MFA from the University of Montana, and has published short fiction in *The New Yorker*, *Harper?s*, *Playboy*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature* and elsewhere. He has been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. His book reviews have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*, and he lives in Ithaca, New York, where he teaches writing at Cornell University.

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Publication Date: February 1, 2000
Mass Market Paperback: 319 pages
Publisher: Riverhead Trade
ISBN-10: 1573227811
ISBN-13: 9781573227810