



The Groucho Letters

Groucho Marx

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No personage is too big, no nuance too small, no subject too far out for Groucho's spontaneous, hilarious, and ferocious typewriter. He writes to comics, corporations, children, presidents, and even his daughter's boyfriend. Here is Groucho swapping photos with T. S. Eliot ("I had no idea you were so handsome!"); advising his son on courting a rich dame ("Don't come out bluntly and say, 'How much dough have you got?' That wouldn't be the Marxian way"); crisply declining membership in a Hollywood club ("I don't care to belong to any social organization that will accept me as a member"); reacting with utmost composure when informed that he has been made into a verb by James Joyce ("There's no reason why I shouldn't appear in *Finnegans Wake* . I'm certainly as bewildered about life as Joyce was"); responding to a scandal sheet ("Gentleman: If you continue to publish slanderous pieces about me, I shall feel compelled to cancel my subscription"); describing himself to the Lunts ("I eat like a vulture. Unfortunately the resemblance doesn't end there"); and much, much more. That mobile visage, that look of wild amazement, and that weaving cigar are wholly captured, bound but untamed, in *The Groucho Letters*.

The Groucho Letters Details

Date : Published August 21st 1994 by Da Capo Press (first published 1967)

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Author : Groucho Marx

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Elliott says

Whenever I'm asked the question, "If you could have dinner with one person from all of history, who would it be?" I reply, "Groucho Marx." This book just reminded me again of why I answer that question the way I do.

Evan says

In 1946, lawyers for Warner Brothers shot off warning letters to the producers of the in-production Marx Brothers opus, *A Night in Casablanca*, threatening the makers with legal action if they used the name "Casablanca" in the film's title.

Much to the chagrin of the lawyers and Warner's head, Jack Warner, Groucho Marx got wind of this inherently absurd threat. Needless to say, they had met their match.

What followed was a flurry of devastatingly funny, insulting letters from Groucho. They are classic lampoons of corporate idiocy, and so bewildering to the stuffed shirts that the threatened suit never materialized.

The Casablanca letters get this collection of Groucho's correspondence -- dating roughly from the mid-1930s to mid-1960s -- off with a bang. The letters in this compilation derive both from Groucho's pen and from those of his correspondents, which included family members, friends and a broad range of show business and other acquaintances. In reading them, not only is Groucho revealed to indeed be one of the wittiest men who ever lived, but his correspondents in almost all instances seem have risen to the occasion by penning small masterpieces of humor of their own.

Enjoyment of this collection is enhanced if you have a better-than-average working knowledge of Hollywood in the golden age.

I'd like to think that after reading this, the quality of my own emails has improved.

The book is something of a national treasure.

Anita Stanton says

Very interesting book. Loved the back and forth banter with Groucho and his friends, keeping in mind they were writing letters and that these letters took more time to get to their recipients. Not like today with our instant messaging.

It was a fun read.

Joe says

'...you have "always voted for the man and never the Party,"... I think this is praiseworthy but reckless, like you're saying that if the Republicans nominate a person you don't approve of, you'll vote against him even if the Democrats put up Mussolini.'

The above came from a letter written in 1943 by the novelist Booth Tarkington to Groucho Marx regarding the latter's politics. And in all of The Groucho Letters, a collection of letters written to and from that master of wordplay, Tarkington's analysis is the closest we get to a statement of Groucho's political philosophy.

And that speaks to how uncomfortable Groucho is with matters of politics. He opines at length on a variety of subjects; going bald, pro baseball, radio vs. television, chasing women and Broadway stage productions. He shows great affection for his family and clearly enjoys chewing the fat with other great wits. But the only political subject he mentions with any frequency is taxes (he wasn't a fan.)

And what's so odd about Groucho's political disinterest is that he's writing during perhaps the most politically explosive time in history; the 1940s through the 1960s. But Groucho has little to say about World War II, communism or fascism and nothing to say about antisemitism or the Holocaust despite all the horrifying details that emerged during this time. I can't fault him for staying away from difficult subjects, but it makes me wonder how much secret pain he felt as a Jewish America, one whose brother Leonard (better known as Chico) adopted an Italian persona to help evade the attention of bullies.

Sometimes you can tell more about a person by what they don't write than what they do. The Groucho Letters is a great read from a great mind, but quite often his wit serves to keep the reader at arm's length.

Edited 10/6/2018

Paul says

This is a great book for reading in waiting rooms or anywhere else where you just have time for snippets. It's a quick, easy read, and Groucho's comments are far superior and funnier than those of any of his correspondents. Here's an example: "I am beginning to regard myself as the kiss of death to any branch of the amusement industry. When I reached big-time vaudeville it immediately began to rot at the seams. During the days when I was a movie actor no theater could survive unless it gave away dishes, cheese and crackers, and, during Lent, costume jewelry. I remember one night leaving the theater after a triple feature with two pounds of Gold Medal butter, a carton of Pepsi-Cola and twelve chances on a soft water tank...."

One thing that amazed me was a repeat reference to an anecdote I just read in the book previous to this: After the fall of the Third Reich, Rudolf Hess parachuted into the U.K. and expected to be received by Churchill as refugee royalty. This book has a quote from Churchill about the incident, with Churchill telling an emissary: Tell him to come back later this afternoon; I have a lot to do in the morning.

While not as funny as his public writing, this book shows his incredible gift for comedy.

Vishnu says

What wondrous wit! Almost as much fun as his films. Crisp wisecracks abound, laughter flows, gaiety prevails.

Brandy says

Sometimes, my internal monologue is narrated by Groucho.
If I have a witty comeback or innuendo... It is his voice I hear.

"Each morning when I open my eyes I say to myself: I, not events, have the power to make me happy or unhappy today. I can choose which it shall be. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. I have just one day, today, and I'm going to be happy in it..."

-Groucho Marx

Paul Secor says

Some funny stuff here, but also some chaff. If you want the best Groucho, watch the Marx Brothers films and You Bet Your Life videos.
Four stars because it's Groucho. Anyone else, it would be three.

Jeff Crompton says

I didn't find Groucho's letter's as hilarious as some reviewers here, but he was certainly an excellent, clever writer, and there's plenty of funny stuff here.

R.K. Cowles says

4 1/4 stars

Ángel says

La correspondencia del genial Groucho Marx con su familia, amigos, productores, escritores, periodistas, admiradores y demás, aparece en una cuidada edición por parte de Anagrama, "La conjura de la risa", la cual es indispensable.

Estas cartas irónicas y divertidas son una gran obra de la literatura epistolar. Olviden a Cantinflas, si de verdad quieren sonreír, y vuélvanse marxistas

Dolores says

This classic collection of Groucho Marx's correspondence, which was donated to the Library of Congress, at their request, gives the best glimpse into who Groucho Marx was. Not only do we see his letters to his family and friends, who included some of the century's most famous people, but we get to see what people wrote in return. Groucho's personality and wit shine through, and these letters are a rare treasure.

With little formal education, Groucho could construct a letter better than most people with college degrees. He shows himself as witty, acerbic, sometimes sentimental and, yes, often grouchy. The book starts off with his infamous exchange with the legal department at Warner Brothers, who claim they own the rights to the movie title "Casablanca." Groucho responds that, perhaps, since the Marx Brothers were famous before the Warner Brothers, that perhaps they owned the rights to use "Brothers"?

We see Groucho's exchanges with many of his friends, but not much between the brothers themselves, since they were almost always together and there was no need of correspondence. We see Groucho's complaints and his praise. The most memorable part of the book is Groucho's legendary correspondence with the poet, T.S. Elliot. Groucho is clearly in awe of the poet, who seems equally in awe of the comic. It takes several years for this predecessor of the modern "Email friendship" to become a "real life friendship" when Groucho and his wife fly to London to meet "Tom" and his wife. We find out about the evening via a letter Groucho sent to another person. We also see a letter where Groucho mourns T.S. Elliot's passing.

This collection of letters is never out-dated, and never becomes boring. There is always something to read, somewhere in the book. It is not a book that you will read, then forget about. It's an amazing, historical collection of wit, sarcasm and genuine tenderness that is essential to any humor library.

Norman says

This book was amazing. It was more than amazing. They haven't invented a word yet for what this book is. I can tell you that it kept me highly entertained while waiting at my desk for customers to call. In fact, I would rather read this book than talk to those customers. I am disconnecting my phone and starting all over again.

Marie Grassick says

What can I say; the man was funny, clever and seldom unkind.

Kathy Olivos says

Me llevé este libro en préstamo por 2 razones: 1- soy fan de Woody Allen quien a su vez es fan de Groucho Marx, 2- Me pareció extraño encontrar este título en una ciudad y época tan alejada de la realidad y contexto histórico del personaje. Respecto al contenido, debo decir que al no estar familiarizada con la vida y obra de

Groucho ni con el mundo del espectáculo norteamericano de la primera mitad del siglo XX, se me hizo algo complicado asimilar la cantidad de personajes a quienes aparecen dirigidas las cartas del comediante.

De todas maneras, hubo frases que me sacaron más de una sonrisa, se notaba que el tipo era un humorista innato. Eso sí, después de unas ciento y tantas páginas, tuve que aplicar "lector macho" no más. Mal ahí el editor del libro, faltó una selección más acotada. Resumiendo y a fin de cuentas, yo que sé!
