

The World's Funniest Joke

The world's funniest joke was written by Spike Milligan

Roger Highfield, Science Editor

(Daily Telegraph: 09/06/2006)

Detective work by a professor investigating the psychology of humour has revealed that Spike Milligan was the author of the world's funniest joke.

Five years ago, Prof Richard Wiseman, of the University of Hertfordshire, did an online experiment in which 300,000 people from around the world took part in LaughLab, where they voted for the best gag.

Yesterday, at the Cheltenham Science Festival, Prof Wiseman said he has now discovered that it was almost certainly written by Milligan.

The joke runs as follows:

Two hunters are out in the woods in New Jersey when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed.

The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps 'My friend is dead! What can I do?'

The operator says: 'Calm down, I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead.'

There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says 'OK, now what?'

"It is very rare to be able to track down the origin of any joke but this is an exception," said Prof Wiseman. "There is some very rare footage from 1951 showing the Goons in their first TV appearance. Just by chance I saw it on a documentary and saw a version of the very same joke."

The material would have been written by Spike Milligan and the script reads:

Michael Bentine: I just came in and found him lying on the carpet there.

Peter Sellers: Oh, is he dead?

Bentine: I think so.

Sellers: Hadn't you better make sure?

Bentine: All right. Just a minute.

Sound of two gun shots.

Bentine: He's dead.

Prof Wiseman contacted Milligan's daughter, Sile, and she is as certain as she can be that he would have written the gag. She said she was "delighted that dad wrote the world's funniest joke".

Prof Wiseman said: "I think what is interesting here is that a joke from the 1950s still works, and how it has transformed over time from a cosy sitting room to hunters in New Jersey."

He added: "Spike Milligan was clearly into surreal humour. The sort of people who like his stuff will be people with a high tolerance for ambiguity because the sketches don't really have a sense of closure."