SCHADENFREUDE

ALSO BY TIFFANY WATT SMITH

The Book of Human Emotions
On Flinching

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SCHADENFREUDE

The Joy of Another's Misfortune

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PROFILE BOOKS

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First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

Published in association with Wellcome Collection

wellcome collection

183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE
www.wellcomecollection.org

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 908 5
eISBN 978 1 78283 381 9

'The blessed in the kingdom of heaven will see the punishments of the damned, so that their bliss will be that much greater.'

– St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, written 1265–1274

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Times I feel pleased at things going wrong for other people:

When a news correspondent gets tangled up
in her scarf in strong winds on live TV.

Seeing an urban unicyclist almost
collide with a parked car.

At the shops, when the person in front of me is rude
to the cashier and then their card is declined.

When I hear about satnavs sending lorries down
narrow country lanes where they get stuck.

When my co-worker was training for a marathon,
boring us all with his training plans and special
diet, ostentatiously checking his Fitbit and tweeting
his stats, wearing his tiny, shiny red running
shorts into work, festooning said shorts over his
desk chair to dry, stretching by the photocopier,
talking about his groin injury, always smelling of
sweat and then not completing his marathon.

Tattoo fails (no regerts!).

And once, in my twenties, when my
effortlessly attractive friend got dumped.

PROLOGUE

A Community of the Failed

Last Tuesday, I went to the corner shop to buy milk, and found myself pausing by the celebrity gossip magazines. And my first instinct, just in case someone was listening in on my thoughts, was to think: *ugh, who buys those terrible magazines*. But then I picked one up, *just out of curiosity*. There was the cellulite, the weight gain and loss, the bikinis riding up between the bum cheeks and bingo wings circled in red. My favourite story was an interview with a pop star, or perhaps she was a model, who lived in a giant luxury mansion. Now I'm the sort of person who usually curdles with envy on hearing about someone else's luxury mansion. But this was different. The story was about how she was lonely. Tragically lonely following a tragic break-up.

I looked about, took the magazine to the till and counted out my change. There was a warm sensation working its way across my chest. I felt lucky. No, that's not it. I felt smug.

This is a confession. I love daytime TV. I smoke, even though I officially gave up years ago. I'm often late, and usually lie about why. And sometimes I feel good when others feel bad.

What is Schadenfreude?

The boss calling himself 'Head of Pubic Services' on an important letter.

Celebrity Vegan Caught in Cheese Aisle.

When synchronised swimmers get confused, swivel the wrong way, and then have to swivel back really quickly and hope no one notices.

The Japanese have a saying: 'The misfortunes of others taste like honey.' The French speak of *joie maligne*, a diabolical delight in other people's suffering. The Danish talk of *skadefryd*, and the Dutch of *leedvermaak*. In Hebrew enjoying other people's catastrophes is *simcha la-ed*, in Mandarin *xìng-zāi-lè-huò*, in Serbo-Croat it is *zlùradōst* and in Russian *zloradstvo*. More than two thousand years ago, Romans spoke of *malevolentia*. Earlier still, the Greeks described *epichairekakia* (literally *epi*, over, *chairo*, rejoice, *kakia*, disgrace). 'To see others suffer does one good,' wrote the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. 'To make others suffer even more so. This is a hard saying, but a mighty, human, all-too-human principle.'

For the Melanesians who live on the remote Nissan Atoll in Papua New Guinea, laughing at other people's pain is known as 'Banbanam'. At its most extreme, it involves taunting a dead rival by exhuming their corpse and scattering the

remains around the village. More of an everyday sort of Banbanam is gloating at someone's humiliating failure behind their back – as when the rival villagers' feast day is rained on because their Weather Magician's spells fail, or a wife grabs her cheating husband by the testicles and ignores his pleas for mercy. Banbanam is a kind of resistance too. Melanasians still enjoy telling the story of how an Australian government minister visited the village, got annoyed because the villagers wouldn't do what he wanted, drove away in a huff and crashed into a tree.

In historical portraits, people beaming with joy look very different to those slyly gloating over another's bad luck. However, in a laboratory in Würzburg in Germany in 2015, thirty-two football fans agreed to have electromyography pads attached to their faces, which would measure their smiles and frowns while watching TV clips of successful and unsuccessful football penalties by the German team, and by their arch-rivals, the Dutch. The psychologists found that when the Dutch missed a goal, the German fans' smiles appeared more quickly and were broader than when the German team scored a goal themselves. The smiles of Schadenfreude and joy are indistinguishable except in one crucial respect: we smile more with the failures of our enemies than at our own success.

Make no mistake. Over time, and in many different places, when it comes to making ourselves happy, we humans have long relied on the humiliations and failures of other people.

There has never really been a word for these grubby delights in English. In the 1500s, someone attempted to introduce 'epicaricacy' from the ancient Greek, but it didn't catch on. In

1640, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote a list of human passions, and concluded it with a handful of obscure feelings which 'want names'. 'From what passion proceedeth it,' he asked, 'that men take pleasure to behold from the shore the danger of them that are at sea in a tempest?' What strange combination of joy and pity, he wrote, make people 'content to be spectators of the misery of their friends'? Hobbes's mysterious and terrible passion remained without a name, in the English language at least. In 1926, a journalist in *The Spectator* asserted that 'there is no English word for Schadenfreude because there is no such feeling here'. He was wrong, of course.

I'm British, and enjoying other people's mishaps and misery feels as much part of my culture as teabags and talking about the weather. 'For what do we live but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn,' proclaims Mr Bennet in that most beloved, apparently quintessentially English of novels, *Pride and Prejudice*. Nothing unites us more strongly in self-righteous joy than an MP caught cooking the books. We're even not averse to a little Schadenfreude at our own expense: as George Orwell once remarked, the English are unique for celebrating not military triumphs, but disasters ('Into the valley of death …').

We know how to enjoy failures. But ask us to name this enjoyment, and our language falls into a hypocritical silence. It averts its gaze and squirms a little.

And so we adopted the German word *Schadenfreude*. From *Schaden* meaning damage or harm, and *freude*, meaning joy or pleasure: damage-joy.

No one likes to think about their flaws, but in them so much of what makes us human is revealed. Enjoying other people's misfortunes might sound simple – a mere glint of

malice, a flick of spite. But look closer, and you'll glimpse some of the most hidden yet important parts of our lives.

When I pay attention to the pleasures I might feel in other people's disasters, I am struck by the variety of tastes and textures involved. There is the glee felt at incompetence – not just of skiers face-planting in the snow, but at screw-ups of implausible magnitude:

When NASA lost a $125 million Mars orbiter because half the team were using imperial measurements, and the other, metric.

And then there is the self-righteous satisfaction feeling I get when hypocrites are exposed:

Politician accidentally tweets picture of his erection (he meant to send it directly to his intern).

And of course, there is the inner triumph of seeing a rival falter. The other day, in the campus coffee shop, a colleague asked if I'd got the promotion I'd gone for. *No*. I said. And I noticed, at the corner of his mouth, the barely perceptible twitch of a grin before the tumble of commiserations. *Oh bad luck. Ah, their loss, the idiots.* And I was tempted to ask: *did you just smile?* But I didn't. Because when he loses out – as he sometimes does – I know I experience a happy twinge too.

Sometimes it is easy to share our delight, scoffing at the humiliation of the TV talent show contestant, reposting memes of a disgraced politician's resignation speech, or sharing barely suppressed glee with our fellow classmates

when the teacher farts.

Far harder to acknowledge, even to ourselves, are those spasms of relief which accompany the bad news of our annoyingly successful friends and relatives. They come involuntarily, these confusing bursts of pleasure, swirled through with shame. And they worry us – not just because we may fear that our lack of compassion says something terrible about us – but because they point so clearly to our envy and inferiority, and the way that we eagerly clutch at the disappointments of others in order to feel better about our own:

When my brother took his kids on a fabulous summer holiday to America, I felt bad because I never take my kids anywhere since it's too much effort and too expensive. And then I saw his Facebook status: it rained.

Today, Schadenfreude is all around us. It's there in the way we do politics, how we treat celebrities, in online fail videos. But these heady pleasures are shot through with unease. Moralists have long despised Schadenfreude. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer called it 'an infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness', the very worst trait in human nature. (He also said that anyone caught enjoying the suffering of others should be shunned from human society. Which made me sweat a bit.)

I have come to believe that Schopenhauer was wrong. We might worry that a taste for other people's misery will corrupt our souls, yet this emotion is far from simply 'bad'. It touches on things that have mattered most to human societies for millennia: our instincts for fairness and hatred of hypocrisy;

our love of seeing our rival suffer in the hope that we might win ourselves; our itch to measure ourselves against others and make sense of our choices when we fall short; how we bond with each other; what makes us laugh.

If we peer more closely at this hidden and much-maligned emotion, liberate ourselves from its shame and secrecy, we will discover a great deal about who we really are.

Malicious Delights

When squirrels in my garden forget
where they've buried their nuts.

When aggressive van drivers get
flashed by speed cameras.

When my three-year-old gloats about how
she's got the last biscuit nah-nah-nah-nah-
nah, and is waving it around, and then
our dog snatches it out of her hand.

When the word *Schadenfreude* first appeared in English writing in 1853, it caused great excitement. This was probably not the intention of R. C. Trench, the Archbishop of Dublin, who mentioned it in his bestselling book on philology, *On the Study of Words*. For Trench, the mere existence of the word

Schadenfreude was unholy and fearful, a 'mournful record of the strange wickednesses which the genius of man, so fertile in evil, has invented'.

His fellow Victorians, however, were not so easily put off, and eagerly adopted the word, associating it with a range of pleasures, from hilarity to self-righteous vindication, from triumph to relief. In 1867, Thomas Carlyle, historian and hard-line social commentator, admitted feeling a juicy, if unpatriotic, Schadenfreude ('a secret satisfaction, of the malicious or even of the judiciary kind'), imagining the chaos he hoped would be caused by the passing of the Electoral Reform Act, which gave the vote to some working-class men. In 1881, a chess columnist advised persuading naïve opponents to use a tricky strategy, just to 'indulge in what the Germans call "Schadenfreude"' when they invariably floundered. In the 1890s, animal-rights campaigner Frances Power Cobbe wrote a whole manifesto entitled 'Schadenfreude', identifying the emotion with the bloodlust of boys torturing stray cats for fun. And, like us, Victorians were fond of seeing superior people get their comeuppance. The physician Sir William Gull was a pioneer of the healthy living movement in Victorian England, a 'water drinker' and a vegetarian (almost). He went about giving self-righteous talks about how his lifestyle would protect him from diseases. So when in 1887 it emerged that he had become seriously ill … Well, reported the *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* gleefully, there was 'a certain amount of what the Germans call Schadenfreude' among advocates of 'fuller diet and freer living'.

Today we still associate many different pleasures with this word, unclear perhaps exactly what it means in the original, or where its perimeters lie. But looking at how the word has been

used in English, it is possible to identify five repeated themes.

The first is that Schadenfreude is usually thought an opportunistic pleasure, a spectator sport, felt when we stumble across another's misfortune *which we have not caused ourselves*. The Hollywood villain gloating when Bond is caught by his dastardly plot is not experiencing Schadenfreude, but sadistic pleasure. By contrast, the sidekick who sniggers as a Hollywood villain is accidentally foiled by his *own* dastardly plot when he trips and presses the self-destruct button *is* enjoying Schadenfreude.

The second is that Schadenfreude is usually thought of as a furtive emotion, and no wonder. Outbursts of merriment at another's catastrophes are generally a sign of great villainy. Shylock can barely contain himself on learning that his rival Antonio has lost a cargo ship at sea: 'I thank God, I thank God. Is't true, is't true?'; 'good news, good news!' We might be worried not just about looking malicious, but that our Schadenfreude exposes our other flaws too – our pettiness, our envy, our feelings of inadequacy.

However, the third feature of Schadenfreude is that we often feel entitled to it when the other person's suffering can be construed as a comeuppance – a deserved punishment for being smug or hypocritical, or breaking the law. While it is unlikely that we'd enjoy our moral superiority to their face, gloating is generally permissible at a safe distance. In 2015, US pastor Tony Perkins said that floods were sent by God to punish abortion and gay marriage. And then his own house flooded and he had to escape *in a canoe*. Even the ever-impartial BBC relished this story, posing aerial pictures of the flooded house next to his controversial 'God is trying to send us a message' interview.

Fourth, we tend to see Schadenfreude as a form of respite – the failures of others appease our own envy and inadequacy, and give us a much-needed glimpse of superiority. It says as much about our own vulnerabilities as our attitudes to the behaviour of others. And just as satire is only funny when it punches up, we are most comfortable sniggering at the failures of those more wealthy, attractive and talented than us. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the great theorists of this emotion, argued, Schadenfreude is 'the revenge of the impotent'.

Fifth and finally, Schadenfreude is usually thought of as glee at minor discomforts and gaffes rather than at dire tragedies and deaths (and we usually only think high-order villains are capable of applauding someone's death). But this rule isn't hard and fast, and context matters. We are willing to see celebrities, or people from the remote past, endure horrors that would dismay us if they were happening now or to our friends. All emotions are what psychologists call 'cognitive' – in other words, not simply reflex reactions to external triggers, but complex processes requiring us to appraise and judge our relationship with the world around us and tailor our responses accordingly.

Sometimes we judge wrongly, and our Schadenfreude leaves us feeling morally awkward. There is an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer's infuriatingly perfect neighbour Ned Flanders opens a shop, The Leftorium. Given the chance to imagine three wishes, Homer fantasises that Ned's business collapses. First, he sees the shop empty of customers, then Flanders turning out his pockets, then Flanders begging the bailiffs. It is only when Homer imagines Flanders's grave, Flanders's children weeping beside it, that he stops himself. 'Too far,' he

says, and quickly rewinds to the image of the bankrupt shop.

These questions about how and why we enjoy the pain of others – and what is acceptable and what is 'too far' – have featured in some of the greatest works of philosophy and literature for over two thousand years. But arguably the urgency to understand Schadenfreude has never been so great as today.

An Age of Schadenfreude

Leotard-wearing contestants in a Japanese game show attempt to scale an inflatable water slide, and keep falling down on top of each other.

Millionaire media star and lifestyle guru jailed for insider trading.

'You won't believe what these child celebrities look like now! (Number 2 will shock you!)'.

In December 2008, a reader of the *New York Times* lamented that we are living in a 'Golden Age of Schadenfreude'. Similar phrases appeared on blogs and in op-eds, crossing continents. 'We are living in an Age of Schadenfreude,' proclaimed a comment writer in *The Guardian*, a 'Spitegeist'. Were they right?