



What's So Funny?

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All it takes is a few underhanded moves by a tough ex-cop named Eppick to pull Dortmund into a game he never wanted to play. With no choice, he musters his always-game gang and they set out on a perilous treasure hunt for a long-lost gold and jewel-studded chess set once intended as a birthday gift for the last Romanov czar, which unfortunately reached Russia after that party was over.

From the moment Dortmund reaches for his first pawn, he faces insurmountable odds. The purloined past of this precious set is destined to confound any strategy he finds on the board. Success is not inevitable with John Dortmund leading the attack, but he's nothing if not persistent, and some gambit or other might just stumble into a winning move.

What's So Funny? Details

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From Reader Review What's So Funny? for online ebook

Dolly says

I picked out this book because it was a featured book for one of the book clubs I monitor. Unfortunately, I can't remember which one. Still, I would not have picked out this book without the recommendation, and it was an interesting story. It wasn't nearly as humorous as I expected it to be (I thought it would be similar to a Tim Dorsey novel), but it was entertaining and I appreciated the satire of the ending. The characters were interesting and I found myself rooting for the "criminals." I haven't read any of the other stories in the Dortmunder series before, but I'd be willing to check another one out.

Pat Gerke says

An enjoyable heist story, and worth the read. Westlake takes his time setting up all of his dominoes before sending them into action. In the end I felt a bit too much time was wasted in aligning the pieces and too few of them paid off in the end. However, Westlake's characters and dry humor kept me entertained from cover to cover, leaving me wanting to read another book in the Dortmunder series.

Paula Hebert says

okay, it's not great literature by snob standards, but donald westlake's dortmunder novels will always get four stars from me. anyone who has not read these comedy crime stories is cheating themselves out of a lot of fun. in what's so funny? the morose dortmunder and his band of misfits are strongarmed into stealing a solid gold chess set that is in security so tight it is impossible to get to. needless to say, a series of twists and turns in the plot lead the gang into uncharted territory, and I loved every page of it. if you need a few good laughs, try dortmunder.

E says

It's the first Dortmunder novel I've read, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I really like stories with good capers (like Ocean's Eleven) and this fit the bill. (Though I'm not sure why it's called "What's so Funny?")

I wasn't familiar with the characters that made up the gang, but I was given enough background and they had enough development for me to learn about them and get a sense of who they were without bogging the story down with too much exposition. They are likable and believable enough with a varied set of skills that makes a good team, though there's still an "every man for himself" attitude among them that comes from recognizing that they're all thieves. There's a sense of sympathy for Dortmunder, but it never turns to pity. Even though he's a thief, he's easy to cheer for.

It was nice that it was in NYC, of which I now enjoy having visited and thus have an idea of the layout. The story felt well thought out and didn't have an plot holes I could drive a truck through. Of course the book had an ending in which everything was resolved, but how it got there was satisfactory and engaging. The story

moved along at a good pace and I found it difficult to put the book down, which I figure is the sign of a good book.

I would definitely give another Dortmund novel a read and see how that fares.

Robert J. Sullivan says

You'd think that a 680 lb gold and jewel-encrusted chess set, once intended as a gift for Czar Nicholas II of Russia and subsequently liberated by some enterprising US doughboys after World War I would be exactly the kind of object that John Dortmund, hangdog, recidivist hard-luck criminal mastermind, would love to put his hands on. However, since the chess set is locked in a vault in the sub-sub-sub-basement of a Manhattan bank, John's greed is tempered by his stronger desire to stay out of prison. If it weren't for the incriminating photographs possessed by an ex-cop named Eppick, our hero wouldn't go near it.

Along the way to the finale, Westlake adds little confections, like the Thai-Bangladeshi fusion restaurant called Endi Rhuni where the house specialty is vulture wings.

Another delightful crime caper, a frothy delight with Dortmund and his crew, this one culminates in a door-slamming slapstick farce of a robbery that, once again, is almost the perfect crime. 3 stars

Dyana says

I listened to this book as an audiobook. Altho this is not Westlake's best work, I gave it 5 stars because he is one of my favorite authors, and the story IS about the Dortmund gang. It's a laugh-out-loud humorous crime novel about a group of unlucky bumbling criminals that never get it right. A retired ex-cop named Eppick has just enough evidence to blackmail Dortmund into stealing a priceless chess set (the history of which is too complicated to describe here). The chess set is supposed to be unattainable, but by sheer luck the gang forges ahead. After many twists and turns, the memorable characters attain their goal, but then comes the surprise ending!!!

Michelle says

The Dortmund novels, in case you're not a fan like me, are about John Dortmund and his partners in crime. They are SOOOO funny. They're like a ragtag group of bumbling criminals, that get an E for Effort, but never quite get it right. In this one, they get hired to steal a solid gold chess set, and the ending is hilarious!!! These are laugh-out-loud books. Really worth reading. They all have the same characters, so it's like visiting friends every time you open one of these books up. I'd recommend the Dortmund books to Everyone!!!!

Donald says

Not the best Dortmunder book, but fun none-the-less! John gets put up by a private-eye type, "17 months not a cop" says he, to steal a gold chess set from a bank's vault. And there is also a gold dome that might need some thieving! And, of course, the whole crew gets involved and it's typical Dortmunder luck from then on! The story does go on a bit, but the ending is well done! Not so funny after all!

James says

This is a four-star review and not a five-star review only because Westlake sets the bar for himself so very high that it's sometimes hard for him to maintain such a high level of quality, humor, and style. That said, this is still a highly entertaining and whimsical Dortmunder adventure, with everything you know and love about him and his circle of hapless friends-come-thieves present and accounted for. I've mentioned elsewhere that Westlake clearly maintains a deep wellspring of affection for these guys, and has a grand time putting them through their paces, especially our old friend John Dortmunder, who goes into this particular heist very much against his will--or whatever it is you want to call Dortmunder's motivating force (survival? freedom from boredom?).

Also, one little observation: this book has a lot of Elmore Leonard's fingerprints on it, no doubt because Westlake was as much a reader as he was a writer (God rest his soul), and as Stephen King once said while introducing Harlan Ellison, milk takes the flavor of what it sets next to in the icebox. I'm not saying this is a bad thing, either.

le-trombone says

This is one of Westlake's stories of John Dortmunder, a professional thief who is very good at planning, but who is also very unlucky.

In this book his bad luck shows up first, in the form of Eppick, a retired cop now private detective, who has just enough evidence on Dortmunder for a burglary to convince him to take a job to retrieve a valuable artifact: a chess set originally meant for the last czar of Russia, "acquired" by WWII soldiers in Murmansk, stolen by one of their fellow soldiers, and finally located by the granddaughter of another soldier.

This being a Dortmunder story, things are not simple. The chess set simply cannot be stolen from its present location, so there has to be a way to get it moved. The granddaughter of the surviving soldier is fired for being too forward to one of the heirs of the chess set. Dortmunder's usual gang is on the one hand impatient with his inability to come up with a plan that gets the chess set where it can be stolen, and on the other hand trying to avoid the notice of Eppick by avoiding Dortmunder. And naturally Dortmunder and company don't think they're getting paid well enough for this caper, and feel a need to supplement their income.

This doesn't disappoint, and has the usual humor of a book set around people who think theft is as normal as eating breakfast, but it doesn't hit the peak of a Good Behavior. Dortmunder has done better.

Tim Hicks says

Another solid Dortmunder. Westlake loved these characters, and he's crafted another complex plot. This is formula, but Westlake dresses it up nicely with wisecracks throughout. Thoroughly enjoyable.

F.R. says

This is more like it!

I was disappointed by the last Westlake novel I attempted (a rather humourless thriller entitled 361) and was advised to try a Dortmunder. I'm very glad I did. For years now I've been a Parker fan and these books seem to work as a counter-point to those. In Dortmunder we have a character who, while a really good planner, is not a violent sociopath. It means that Westlake/Stark can take his ideas in a different direction. For example, the proposition put to the lead character in this book would have led to horrible reprisals if put to Parker, but Dortmunder just has to go along with it.

(I did actually spot some over-lap between these series. Both this and Ask The Parrot - a Parker novel from the year before - explicitly reference Poe's The Purloined Letter.)

The plot involves Dortmunder being tasked to steal a gold chess set from a seemingly impregnable vault. Various confusions arise and comic scenarios play out, as the gang brought together tries desperately to pinch victory from the jaws of defeat.

I'm informed there are better Dortmunder novels out there, so I will track them down. It's a task I'm looking forward to.

Spiros says

The best way to think of the Dortmunder books: imagine P.G. Wodehouse (however anachronistically) re-writing Guy Ritchie movies as novels. Sadly, this will be the last of the Dortmunder series; Westlake, like Dickens and Austen, went out still at the top of his game. Who but Westlake would create a NYPD "Chief Inspector Mologna (pronounced Maloney)"? And who but Westlake would have been shameless enough to christen a bungling security outfit "the Continental Detective Agency"?

thefourthvine says

It's sort of hard to rate this one fairly; I understand that there's another Dortmunder book coming out in 2009, but this still feels like the end of an era, given Westlake's death. So there was something of a nostalgia factor at work here.

But, overall, this is just another middling Dortmunder novel - which means it's fun, yes, but not laugh-out-loud funny, the way some of the earlier novels are, and not as complex and devious as most of middle ones

are.

Part of the problem is that the formula is starting to show. (No, part of the problem is that there *is* a formula; the early and middle books lacked that.) It's easy to predict the plot; you take threads A, B, and C, and if you've read other books in the series, you know exactly how it will end up. Part of the problem is that these last books just don't have the edge that the early ones did.

But still - Dortmund and company are good companions for an afternoon, and this book is fun and engaging, if not exactly off the charts. I'd recommend it for people who have read all the books before *Bad News* and still aren't satisfied - and for anyone who is sad that with *Westlake* gone, Dortmund is now a very limited commodity.

Merciful says

Do you know about Dortmund? Man, I love Dortmund! Here's how this one starts:

"WHEN JOHN DORTMUNDER, RELIEVED, walked out of Pointers and back to the main sales floor of the O.J. Bar & Grill on Amsterdam Avenue a little after ten that Wednesday evening in November, the silence was unbelievable, particularly in contrast with the racket that had been going on when he'd left. But now, no. Not a word, not a peep, not a word. The regulars all hunched at the bar were clutching tight to their glasses as they practiced their thousandyard stare, while the lady irregulars mostly seemed to be thinking about their canning. Even Andy Kelp, who had been sharing a bourbon with Dortmund down at the far end of the bar while they waited for the rest of their group to arrive, now seemed to have settled deeply into a search for a rhyme for "silver." All in all, it looked as though a whole lot of interior monologue was going on.

It took Dortmund about one and six-seventeenth seconds to figure out what had changed while he was away. One of the seldom used side booths, the one nearest the street door, was now occupied by a person drinking something out of a tall clear glass, revealing both ice and bubbles within, which meant club soda, which probably meant nonalcoholic. This person, male, about forty-five, who apparently still permitted his grandmother to cut his thick black hair, wore on his lumpy countenance the kind of bland inattention that did not suggest interior monologue but, rather, intense listening. A cop, therefore, and not only that but a cop dressed in what he no doubt thought of as civilian attire, being a shapeless shiny old black suit jacket, an emerald green polo shirt and shapeless tan khakis. He also seemed to subscribe to the usual cop belief that the male body was supposed to have bulges around the middle, like a sack of potatoes, the better to hang the equipment belt on, so that your average law enforcement officer does present himself to the public as a person with a lot of Idaho inside. As Dortmund moved around the corner from the end of the bar and started past the clenched backs of the interior monologists, two things happened which he found disturbing. First, the lumpy features of the cop over there suddenly became even more bland, his eyes even less focused, the movement of his arm bringing club soda to his mouth even more relaxed and even.

It's me! Dortmund screamed inside, without letting anything - he certainly hoped - appear on the surface, it's me he's after, it's me he wants, it's me he's got the tag sale duds on for."

Oh yeah!!! There's no such thing as a bad Dortmund novel.

They are big, big fun!

Merc
