



## Professor at Large: The Cornell Years

*John Cleese*

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And now for something completely different. *Professor at Large* features beloved English comedian and actor John Cleese in the role of ivy league professor at Cornell University. His almost twenty years as professor-at-large has led to many talks, essays, and lectures on campus. This collection of the very best moments from Cleese under his mortarboard provides a unique view of his endless pursuit of intellectual discovery across a range of topics. Since 1999, Cleese has provided Cornell students and local citizens with his ideas on everything from scriptwriting to psychology, religion to hotel management, and wine to medicine.

His incredibly popular events and classes--including talks, workshops, and an analysis of *A Fish Called Wanda* and *The Life of Brian*--draw hundreds of people. He has given a sermon at Sage Chapel, narrated Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* with the Cornell Chamber Orchestra, conducted a class on script writing, and lectured on psychology and human development. Each time Cleese has visited the campus in Ithaca, NY, he held a public presentation, attended and or lectured in classes, and met privately with researchers. From the archives of these visits, *Professor at Large* includes an interview with screenwriter William Goldman, a lecture about creativity entitled, "Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind," talks about *Professor at Large* and *The Life of Brian*, a discussion of facial recognition, and Cleese's musings on group dynamics with business students and faculty.

*Professor at Large* provides a window into the workings of John Cleese's scholarly mind, showcasing the wit and intelligence that have driven his career as a comedian, while demonstrating his knack of pinpointing the essence of humans and human problems. His genius on the screen has long been lauded; now his academic chops get their moment in the spotlight, too.

## Professor at Large: The Cornell Years Details

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# From Reader Review Professor at Large: The Cornell Years for online ebook

## Clive Mccartney says

This is excellent. I went in to this expecting the well trodden path of curmudgeonly English upper class John Cleese bemoaning his fate being forever tied to the Monty Python behemoth. Not so, this book is essentially transcriptions of lectures/PAs given by Cleese during his visiting professorship at Cornell. The man's intellect shines through like a beacon, shedding light on motivations for fame, fortune, humor and religious searching. He uses Python and Fish Called Wanda moments without any of the bitterness for which he's become known and clearly enjoys his engagement with academia.

Highly recommended.

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## J. F. says

Book Review: Professor at Large: The Cornell Years by John Cleese

"And now for something completely different!" I anticipated an exceptionally hilarious reading experience for printed material associated with the name "John Cleese" of Monty Python fame, fondly remembered as the neurotic hotel manager Basil Fawlty in Fawlty Towers and as James Bond's lanky R or Q, a genuinely funny and likable man.

Instead the book enlightens the reader on lectures, interviews and insights into a highly accomplished person - actor, comedian, screenwriter, producer, university rector, visiting professor at Cornell U, self-described "part psychologist, fully public intellectual".

He attended Downing College, Cambridge University, where he received his law degree. He declined a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire).

His ancestral surname was Cheese but his father changed it to Cleese when he joined the British Army in 1915 because he thought it was embarrassing. He overcame his problems in relationship with women for which he blamed his mother and for which he saw a shrink for twenty years.

Although he supported Brexit, he is known to be a far left liberal, friends with Keith Olbermann and Bill Maher, which speaks volumes.

The book and the admiration built up for a such substantially deep person is somewhat eroded by petty partisan barbs on identity politics which fuel antagonism rather than inspire.

"Trump supporters are angry that they don't have a better lifestyle but are resolutely determined not to consider socialism, when it's capitalism that's delivered them the sort of society that they live in. I must be careful. That was a very inflammatory thing to say..."

And quite unnecessary, one should add.

"Well, I think trees should have a vote; they're only about three IQ points lower than Trump supporters anyways. Whoa, at this point in the show... people start walking out."

60 million of them and not all slapstick comedians. Definitely unnecessary and unhelpful. Fortunately the quips appear at the very end of the book.

Review based on an advance reading copy presented by NetGalley and Cornell University Press.

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## **David Wineberg says**

John Cleese is having entirely too much fun. It's nice to be able to pick and choose, and when Cornell University called out of the blue, he was delighted to accept their offer of Professor At Large, a program that takes celebrity academics and prize winners and uses their fame to stir the blood of students and faculty. The requirements were simply to visit at least twice a year for six years, and participate in whatever he fancied.

He ended up doing it for ten years with two extensions gladly approved by Cornell. In his time there, he gave a sermon, narrated Peter and the Wolf with the chamber orchestra, held numerous master classes for writers and actors, and gave joint lectures with Cornell professors in their fields. Because Cleese is a lifetime student. He is constantly researching and learning. His degree is in law, his life is in media, his passions are in psychology and religion, and his energy is abundant. Professor at Large is a sampling of his presentations at Cornell.

By far the most impressive piece is a lengthy interview with William Goldman, who wrote *Butch Cassidy and The Princess Bride* among so many other great films. There is a terrific back and forth between them as they both have so much experience, perception and opinion. Especially on the Goldman side, it often seems as though there is an urgency to tell it; he can't get out the stories fast enough. If Cleese didn't cut in, you know Goldman would go on with more huge insights. Whether it's the process of writing, the torture of Hollywood, the insanity of the star system or the lack of recognition of writers and why that will never change, this chapter alone is worth price of admission.

Naturally, Monty Python's Flying Circus colors nearly everything. Using *The Life of Brian* and *The Meaning of Life*, there's lots to say about religion. Cleese also talks about their process – mostly fighting – of how material was polished and accepted. Apparently, it was Cleese vs Jones most of the time, but he also said no one ever argued about roles. Everyone always agreed who would play what on the show – it was that obvious to them. The words they would speak however, was a battleground.

For those who treasure the archetypical Cleese, there are questions from the audience about his favorite moments in *Fawlty Towers*, *Monty Python*, his favorite film, the most successful whatever, and so on. Cleese uses scenes from his films to illustrate his points about religion as crowd control organizations, which anyone who has seen *The Life of Brian* will recognize immediately.

What John Cleese reveals is his life in psychiatry. He has become very solicitous. He constantly asks "You see what I mean?" This is no longer the arrogant, self-assured John Cleese character we laugh at. The same thing happened to Billy Connolly. Decades in analysis took the edge off and changed his personality profoundly. The deprivations of their childhoods, what gave them their edginess, attitudes and worldviews, have all been sanded smooth by 20+ years in analysis. They are happier for it, they say. These are new men we need to get to know, and Professor At Large is very revealing that way.

## **Dick Reynolds says**

The book is a compilation of lectures and interviews conducted by “Professor” John Cleese at Cornell University from 1999 to 2017. Cleese is notably remembered for co-founding Monty Python, the comedy troupe responsible for the sketch show Monty Python’s Flying Circus and four Monty Python films. Later he co-starred with Kevin Cline, Jamie Lee Curtis and Python colleague Michael Palin in the film A Fish Called Wanda.

In October 2000 Cleese conducted a Cornell seminar on screenwriting with Bill Goldman who won Oscars for his screenplays of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and All the President’s Men. (Bill Goldman passed away on November 16th of this year.) Goldman, who had written both books and screenplays, pointed out the big difference in what happens after each work is finished. When the writer turns in his screenplay, he loses control of it. What happens then is up to the director and the folks who control the money. The final reality is the star of the movie; you’d better write for her or him.

There is a chapter detailing a seminar Cleese conducted in April 2001 with Stephen Ceci, Professor of Developmental Psychology. The subject was The Human Face: how we are influenced by the way people look, how we fail to read them, and how we try to see people. Both Cleese and Ceci present a lot of fascinating information with one item in particular called “the golden mean” that was discovered by the ancient Greeks. It’s the ratio 1:1.618 and has been verified by many examples. If a face is found beautiful then the width of the mouth is exactly 1.618 times the width of the nose. (Now where did I leave that tape measure?)

In April 2009 Cleese hosted a seminar on group dynamics with Professor Elizabeth Mannix. Cleese shared a bit of humor when he told a joke about universities now using lawyers instead of rats in their experiments. One of the more interesting items they discussed concerned his group on the Monty Python series. Each member of the group contributed in both the writing of and acting in sketches. He remarked that the squabbles and fighting were always about the writing and never the casting.

The last chapter is the most recent, a September 2017 interview with Cleese himself. He seems to be a pretty happy fellow and comes up with some very funny comments. He loves the New York Times but thinks all the English newspapers are terrible. He also has some decidedly uncomplimentary views of Donald Trump. He likens his presidency to a wrestling match, an event that is totally phony, and wonders why the American people can’t see that he’s hopeless.

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## **David Ball says**

The sample of lectures provided in John Cleese’s Professor at Large are not at all what I expected. I knew they would be amusing, and they were, but my main takeaway was not John Cleese’s sense of humour, but the surprising breadth and depth of his intelligence. I was not just entertained; I was engaged, educated, and engrossed. John Cleese was writing about hare brains and tortoise minds a full ten years before Daniel Kahneman’s classic book on the theory, Thinking Fast and Slow, and the importance of time and space to creativity. In fact there’s quite a lot on the creative process, including thoughts on the inner workings on the famed Monty Python quintet, and an in depth three hour conversation with William Goldman, the famed screen writer. A couple of lectures cover religion, and being Cleese, his views are refreshingly irreverent: he

highlights the many inconsistencies between the mysticism of the bible and the fear and control of organized religion. There is also a captivating chapter on the human face: what constitutes beauty; advances in facial recognition; and the difficulties of telling when one is lying. The only mild criticism I have of the book is that a couple of the themes are repeated. If I was to put a positive spin on the repetition I would argue it helpfully reinforces his message, but with only seven lectures chosen from his twenty years at Cornell, I was a bit disappointed. But regardless Cleese is good company. Comedians rarely age well, but in this case whatever Cleese may have lost in terms of funniness, he's more than made up for with intellectual verve and curiosity.

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### **Janet Martin says**

While not all of the chapters are spectacular, some are, and all well worth reading. Excellent book!

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### **Melise says**

I read an advanced reading copy from Cornell University Press via NetGalley. Thanks!

This book is comprised of a number of lectures given by John Cleese in his role as a visiting professor at Cornell. They cover a wide range of topics, including screenwriting/storytelling in conjunction with William Goldman, a treatise on religion told via examples from , psychology and a number of other topics. His point of view is interesting and well thought through, and his writing/lectures are informative and full of humor.

All in all, I very much enjoyed this book, and am glad to have had the opportunity to read it.

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### **Margaret says**

I found this book astonishing and absolutely fascinating. Professor at Large, The Cornell Years by John Cleese is a window into the mind of the well known English actor, writer and comedian of Monty Python fame. He was invited to be a Fellow guest Professor at Ivy League Cornell University in 1999. He was asked to spend two week periods during which he lectured, lead master classes and an amazing array of other activities. What many don't realize is that John Cleese is a man of high intellect and has continued his exploration and discovery of many diverse areas that interest him. He has delved deeply into religion, psychology, management, creativity, etc. He is quite multi faceted and the book presents this so well in the selected lectures, conversations and even a sermon made during the 20 years he's spent at Cornell. Students and Professors love listening to and conversing with this highly articulate Englishman on endless topics. His point of view on so many subjects is innovative and insightful. This book also includes a lot of background about his many movies such as Life of Brian, The Holy Grail, and a Fish Called Wanda, and the Monty Python and Fawlty Towers series as well as his appearance in James Bond movies and his many books. John Cleese is a remarkable man and this book gives us a great deal of insight into his mind. I was given copy of this book and am doing a voluntarily review. #JohnCleese #NetGalley

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## **Zohar - ManOfLaBook.com says**

For more reviews and bookish posts please visit: <http://www.ManOfLaBook.com>

**Professor at Large: The Cornell Years** by John Cleese is a non-fiction book with speeches, essays, and interviews of the famed comedian. Mr. Cleese had the role of visiting professor at Cornell University and this book is a collection of some of his visits.

John Cleese has always been a favorite of mine. I still remember how much I enjoyed, and wondered why many didn't, the movie *Time Bandits*. When I saw the book **Professor at Large: The Cornell Years** by John Cleese I did not know what to expect, but knew that it would most likely be up my alley and a joy to read. I was right.

At first I had no idea that Mr. Cleese was Professor at Large at Cornell University. Frankly, I had no idea what "Professor at Large" is, luckily the introduction by Stephen J. Ceci made sure to make that clear right off the bat. Seems like Professor at Large, a visiting professor, is a six year term for an eminent person (Nobel laureates, Pulitzer Prize winners and other esteemed intellectuals) who are asked to come to the university twice a year, for two weeks at a time and give lectures, conduct interviews, give talks and more. Basically, a person of note to come down and disrupt the schedule, allowing for students (and faculty) to see things from a different perspective.

The appointment of Mr. Cleese was such a huge success, that he was asked to renew his tenure two more years (the maximum allowed). Afterwards, the university felt that he is making such a huge contribution, and can continue to do so, that Mr. Cleese was granted the title of The Provost's Professorship, an initial five year term.

The book consists of seven parts, from lectures, to conversations, to transcripts of seminars. Each one intellectually stimulating, intelligent, and thoughtful. I always assumed that many comedians are intelligent people, one can tell from Mr. Cleese's projects how his intellect has affected the material. I had no idea how bright Mr. Cleese is, how far his interests take him and that he is able to carry an intelligent conversation with many luminaries as an equal.

The highlight of the book, for me, was Mr. Cleese's conversation with Academy Award winner William Goldman, a novelist (*The Princess Bride*, *Marathon Man*), playwright (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Princess Bride*, *All the President's Men*), and screenwriter (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*). The transcript has a wonderful back and forth between the two men who spent years in the entertainment industry and are disillusioned, but still love the work.

This section alone was, for me, worth buying the book.

In this age, where anti-intellectualism is sadly seen as positive personality trademark by many, it's nice to read a book which doesn't shy from it, but embraces this aspect of humanity. An enjoyable, easy to read, entertaining and smart book.

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## **Gaele says**

Suffice it to say that I've been a fan of Cleese and his work for years – from *Monty Python* to *Harry Potter*'s

Nearly Headless Nick. But this isn't simply a collection of funny stories presented with the sharp-wit, layered comedy for which he's known. No these essays are insightful and probing, intelligent and requiring the reader (or listener) to approach each moment with an attitude that allows you to travel along the pathways and branches to the ultimate point, or a new way of viewing that point. Comedians as a whole are not unable to toss ideas and concepts about to create wholly new combinations and perspectives, and Cleese's concepts and ideas come from everything and everywhere and you will find as you read on, several references to works of fiction and non-fiction, scholarly and popular tomes that inform, help build a reference, or even provide the 'jumping off point' at which his thought and conclusion began.

From moments about Python and show-business in general, to society's ills, dynamics of groups large and small, and even some moments in interviews with questions, answers and topics that seem to be one thing – but quickly move off into that peculiar area that caught interest and fuels more questions. In this day and age (particularly in the US) where intelligent thought is subjugated and mocked, where leaders can't craft a sentence and 140 characters have become 'the standard' for domestic and international policy – this is a celebration of the intellectually facile and curious. It demands you pay attention, spurs curiosity and provides another approach to viewing a situation by exercising those often long-dormant muscles that encourage a view from another side, or approached from a new understanding. Oh sure, these aren't truly 'life lessons' to be memorized and practiced from this day forward, but contain little nuggets that speak directly to the curious – giving them new areas to question or examine.

Even more intriguing in this collection is Cleese's tone and approach to the subjects upon which he touches: it isn't a laugh a minute, but carefully crafted, almost sly insertions of humor that appears entirely coincidental, but if you've paid any attention at all to the man, you will see that there is an enjoyment in sharing and finding the humor, often deeply buried, that can arrive in even the most dire of circumstances. With a mix of lecture, interview and a question and answer session – there are moments here that will soon become your favorite, until the next comes along. Do yourself a favor and don't get this book if you want a barrage of silly walks and knights who say "ni", there are no dead parrots or elderberries. It's intelligent, thought provoking and spurred a list of titles that I've been diligently searching down to inform myself with original works mentioned.

I received an eArc copy of the title from the publisher via Edelweiss for purpose of honest review. I was not compensated for this review: all conclusions are my own responsibility.

Review first appeared at I am, Indeed

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### **Julie Stielstra says**

I will be upfront: I've been waiting for decades for an interlude between Cleese's marriages to snap him up for myself. And am an unreconstructed Monty Python fan. And once upon a time I was hired to work at a university where our new employee orientation included several of Cleese's customer service videos. So of COURSE I was going to read this.

This is NOT Monty Python. Or even Cleese's memoir "So, Anyway." Instead, it is a compilation of lectures, discussions, interviews, and even a sermon (!) conducted by Cleese during his stint as an invited professor-at-large at Cornell University. This is the very smart, thoughtful, curious Cleese with a wide-ranging and serious mind. The chapters explore the mysteries of writing, religion, psychology, facial recognition,

creativity, group dynamics... and it's mostly interesting and enjoyable. Well, the screenwriting workshop with William Goldman was too long and repetitive, but worth the read for wannabe writers. And he can be a little flaky, fascinated by Jung, Watts, and other kind of woo-woo folks. But there is still the sharp, sarcastic, dry Cleese I love, and the requisite bits from Monty Python or Fawlty Towers still make me bark with laughter... Plus he adores cats. And there's a lemur on the back cover. A good read for fans.

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## **John Plowright says**

Tony Hancock's comic persona, like the man himself, was bent on self-education. Having left school at the age of fifteen, Hancock spent the rest of his too short life trying to cultivate his mind by grappling with the likes of Kant and Bertrand Russell.

John Cleese, by contrast, is an erudite and highly articulate Cambridge-educated writer-performer whose inquiring mind ranges widely and intelligently. These characteristics are showcased in 'Professor at Large' - a collection of writings reflecting Cleese's association with Cornell University, which dates from his appointment there as an A.D White Professor-at-Large in 1999.

The varied nature of that association is explained in Stephen J. Ceci's introduction to the current volume which then contains seven pieces by or featuring Cleese, ranging from a screenwriting seminar with Bill Goldman (which covers much the same ground as Cleese's 1991 Radio Five Chain Reaction interaction with Goldman) to an illustrated talk on the Human Face (which covers material on facial recognition, expression and beauty which will contain few surprises for those familiar with Cleese's 2001 TV series of that name or the spin-off book, co-written with Brian Bates).

On the subject of repetition it is worth mentioning that certain anecdotes, quotations and thoughts also recur within 'Professor at Large', although this is hardly surprising, at least in relation to Cleese's thoughts on religion, given that the pieces include not only his musings on 'Life of Brian' but also a sermon preached at Sage Chapel. For the record, Cleese whilst highly critical of institutionalized religion, which he regards as largely a matter of "crowd control", is surprisingly receptive to meditational and mystic forms of religion, which seek a more direct acquaintance with the divine.

While I'm in critical mode I'd also say that there are sometimes too many – and too lengthy – quotations, and there's even the occasional error, such as referring to Thomas Aquinas as "Sir" rather than "Saint", and attributing the phrase "kill your darlings" to William Faulkner when really it's the saintly Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch who deserves the credit for coining the phrase "murder your darlings".

How, then, can one justify giving this book a four-star rating? The answer is that whilst it might initially appear to be something of a curate's egg it's actually more of a magpie's treasure trove of little gems.

As is evident from his work with Video Arts or his party political broadcasts, John Cleese is a great communicator and a natural teacher with the ability to reflect informatively and humorously on a broad range of subjects.

Those misguidedly looking for jokes will be disappointed by this book as outside material relating to Monty Python, Fawlty Towers and a Fish Called Wanda there are just two – one about lawyers and one about the French. Those, on the other hand, looking to be informed as well as entertained, particularly on the workings of the human mind, have something of a treat in store.

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## Annie says

Originally published on my blog: Nonstop Reader.

***Professor at Large: The Cornell Years*** is a collection of vignettes showcasing a series of talks, lectures, and workshops delivered by John Cleese during his more than decade long association with Cornell University as a visiting professor. The subjects are wide ranging, always witty, often profound and a joy to read.

In the current culture of anti-intellectualism it's all too easy to become disillusioned and exhausted by all of the backlash against well spoken prose, language, literature, intelligence... This book (and Professor Cleese) are erudite and unapologetically intelligent. Additionally, the people who join him in his talks are also intelligent (often brilliant), well spoken, and profound. His back-and-forth with William Goldman alone is worth the price of the book. The other chapters include neurologists, psychologists, discussions on religion, culture and the meaning of life.

There's a lot of material here for fans of Monty Python and Cleese the Actor, but there's also a lot to love here for anyone who loves to read intelligent well spoken people talking about interesting topics.

I enjoyed it hugely and recommend it to everyone.

248 pages, available in ebook and hardcover formats.

Anticipated release date: October 15, 2018 from Cornell University Press.

Five stars

Disclosure: I received an ARC at no cost from the author/publisher for review purposes.

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## David says

An excellent sample of the serious Cleese, who is still and always humorous but also very insightful, provocative, intelligent, sensitive, and intellectually rigorous. Definitely worth reading and engaging.

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## Denny says

Considering the author, I was disappointed by the lack of humorous material in *Professor at Large*. Some of these essays date back to 1999 & 2000 so are somewhat dated. Cleese returns to many of the same themes and anecdotes in essay after essay, so it's very repetitive. I didn't care much for Cleese's very defeatist, pessimistic attitude toward the future of humanity, although given the current state of human affairs, it's easy to understand why he feels that way. Hell, these days, it's hard *not* to feel that way much of the time. Finally, Cleese bases many of his conclusions about psychology and mental health on really old studies, some of which, he repeatedly reminds us, he co-wrote a couple of books about decades ago. I really didn't enjoy *Professor at Large* much, but I didn't dislike it enough to rate it 1 star.

