

## **The First Two Pages of “Horse Feathers” by Jeff Cohen**

From *Monkey Business: Crime fiction Inspired by the Films of the Marx Brothers*

Edited by Josh Pachter (Untreed Reads)

An Essay by Jeff Cohen

The first thing to understand about this story is that the story—that is, the plot—doesn’t matter at all. It’s absolutely irrelevant, and there’s a whole lot of relevants in the circus.

If you didn’t get that joke, I don’t blame you at all, but it should prepare you for what you’re in for. This story was written by request of the editor Josh Pachter for a book of stories “inspired by” the films of the Marx Brothers.

It was an offer I couldn’t refuse, which is a reference to a movie that had no Marx Brothers in it. I have been a somewhat obsessive fan of Groucho, Harpo, Chico (it’s pronounced “Chick-o”), and sometimes Zeppo since high school. For me, not for them. Not a one of the Marx Brothers ever attended high school.

The thing to know about the first two pages of the story “Horse Feathers” (not to be confused with the movie *Horse Feathers*, which came out in 1932 and has stayed out to this day) is that they are meant to set the tone, and whatever plot points that are revealed are almost completely unnecessary, as is the plot. The first two pages establish the narrator’s voice, which is important because in this case the narrator is the character who would have been played by Groucho Marx.

Before he could answer the doors to the library, which were as tall as a brontosaurus but not as pretty, swung open and in waddled Mrs. Cumbersome herself. She had to come in herself because she wouldn't have fit through the doors with anybody else. There had been talk a few years earlier that Mrs. Cumbersome could become the 49<sup>th</sup> state but she wouldn't stand still long enough to pose for the mapmakers.

"Oh, Mr. Turntable!" she shrilled. "You must help me find my ruby!"

She sidled up to me dragging in her wake two men I hadn't seen in the room before. One wore a pointed cap that made him look like a very thick firecracker. The other had red curly hair, a top hat and a trench coat that had seen better trenches. Mrs. Cumbersome grabbed my left arm and gripped it so hard I thought I might just leave her with it and slip out the back door.

"Look, Mrs. Cumbersome, I'm not a detective; I'm a simple newspaper reporter and currently out of work. And besides, can't one of those two bloodhounds who just followed you in find this rock for you?" I disengaged my arm from her vice-like grip and looked at the one in the pointed hat. "Couldn't they afford a real dunce cap in your school?" I asked him. "They obviously had a real dunce."

"Hey, watsa matta wit you?" he said. "You gotta mental condition or something? I'm here to guard the ruby."

"How's that going so far?"

"Itsa fine. I get two meals a day and a bed to sleep under." He looked proud.

It seemed to me that the story had to be told in Groucho's voice. If it was in Harpo's voice, the pages would be blank, and if it was in Chico's alleged Italian accent, it would be so annoying to read that nobody would ever get all the way through it, including me. (Note the dialogue above if you don't believe me.) A third-person narrative would be impossible. An omniscient narrator laying out the events in the story without commenting on them would kill the comedy and make the story unreadable.

So if the story begins with a plot point—*The Cumbersome Ruby is missing*—that’s just a tease. The jokes are the point.

In my story the plot is basic: a very expensive ruby has been stolen and the owner, for reasons even she probably couldn’t explain, wants a seedy reporter from a horse racing sheet to investigate. He narrates the story.

The goal on my end was to saturate the story with jokes as the early Marx films were absolutely stuffed with them. So the plot is referred to here and there but it’s not the thrust of the story.

“The Cumbersome Ruby is missing.”

Benedict Huxley looked like he should be playing a butler in a William Powell movie and he sounded like he should be announcing the Prince of Sylvania at Buckingham Palace. Instead, he was intoning his trivial bit of information to me with the gravity of announcing a political assassination, something else that wouldn’t worry me.

“Have you looked in the sofa cushions?” I asked. “Sometimes things get wedged in there and you have a devil of a time digging them out. We lost my uncle in there for three years. And he wasn’t a small man. He played football at Darwin College.”

Some of the references are taken directly from the film *Horse Feathers* to justify the whole “inspired by” thing.

The opening pages get the three main characters (who would be the brothers) introduced and all doing their own thing(s) at the same time, which was the style I was going for. It also introduces the character who would no doubt be played by Margaret Dumont, the most frequent of the brothers’ foils. Mrs. Cumbersome has her own style of speech and personality.

It was very difficult to write the story, much as writers in the 1930s found it difficult to write for the Marx Brothers on film. They are three very distinctive personalities, three separate styles of comedy, but they all have to mesh. It can't seem like they come from separate universes. But in the end, it was a lot of fun.

Write your inspirations sometime. It's never not rewarding.

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Jeff Cohen writes what he (and some other people) believe to be funny mysteries under his own name and as E.J. Copperman. Series so far include the Jersey Girl Legal Mystery series, currently being represented by *Judgment at Santa Monica*, the Haunted Guesthouse series, the Asperger's Mystery series, and a couple of other series even Jeff can't remember the titles of. You can find those titles at [www.ejcopperman.com](http://www.ejcopperman.com), [www.jeffcohenbooks.com](http://www.jeffcohenbooks.com) or [www.cohencoppermanbooks.com](http://www.cohencoppermanbooks.com). He says that the jokes are the thing but there are stories in all these books too.