How should one write about irony? The temptation is to compete with the material to pursue tangents, deploy puns, and attempt to expose the nature of irony by playing double games with language. This is decidedly not Linda Hutcheon's method, as she hints here: "If, as has been claimed, there has been a paucity of major scholarly work on the language of humor..., perhaps it is in part because the language of irony has seemed a somewhat appropriately 'serious' object of academic study" (26). This is a serious book (with no need for inverted commas to qualify the seriousness), and, on the evidence presented, no one would mistake Hutcheon for a wit. She would rather plod through ironies carefully and thoroughly, describing what happens almost in the manner of an empirical scientist. In lucid, though seldom elegant, language, *Irony's Edge* surveys a lot of ironic activity in various art forms: literature, music, museology, film, theatre, performance art, and more; the range really is very wide. It also covers a great deal of the mountain of writing about irony: there are twenty-nine pages of bibliography and acres of careful synthesis of theoretical opinion. In its serious and scholarly way, it is also a very sincere book. Hutcheon's fundamental principle, and the point which sets her work apart from the mass of formalist and intentionalist analysis of irony that has gone before, is that irony is an event which is inferred by the reader/watcher/listener, rather than a formal trope of language or a deliberate message from the artist. Wisely, she does not claim that form or intention are irrelevant to irony, but she carves out her territory in "the theory and politics of irony" in the zone of reader-response and the pragmatics of reception. And this is where the sincerity comes in, and becomes rather obtrusive. Hutcheon writes about herself and her own reactions a lot, and is always ready with the disclaimer that she sees a text or a juxtaposition as ironic in the way she describes, but another witness may not see it that way. This insistence makes the important point that irony is in the eye of the beholder, and allows us to see the event of irony occurring, with all its nuances of ascribed intention and necessary activations of latent intertextual knowledge, but it also creates a nagging and sometimes ponderous presence in the text. On balance, the first-person narrative is justified here on heuristic grounds, but I do hope that it does not herald a large-scale invasion of the confessional mode into the interpretation of ironic texts. Of course, no interpretation of any text let alone ironic ones can be objective, but if I have to wade through a careful self-analysis of every middle-class professional critic's pre-suppositions, reactions, and study-leave itineraries while they tell me what they think about the text, I will be down the CES looking for "retraining options" in no time. Hutcheon
situates herself relentlessly; this is mostly relevant but it risks being tedious.

Hutcheon is dogged and unimaginative in her pursuit of irony's edge, and that (paradoxically) is this book's great virtue. A more fey and, well, ironic approach would probably have more of the savour of irony, but it would not be able to describe the cultural function of irony as clinically as does Hutcheon's. D.C. Muecke in his fine and still very useful book *The Compass of Irony* can mark the life and evasiveness of the trope with a fine phrase like: "Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist; there is plenty to take hold of if only one could" (3). The sense of awe, the literalised "grip" metaphor, the gnomic open-endedness, the wit; these are critical qualities which bring us into the presence of the subject of irony. Hutcheon never gives us this feeling. She describes, but never dances with, irony. Consequently, as an honest broker, she has precisely the right level of slowness and seriousness to describe the way the joke works. And the joke is somehow always new to her. She shows how the attribution of irony is a phenomenon which depends on complex acts of cultural framing, and how particular ironies hail us into various overlapping and interlinked discursive communities which are equipped to infer them. She is also laudably agnostic about the political and cultural effects of irony. She makes the point that most discussions of irony before the 1960s tended to stress its reactionary and elitist tendencies, while most since then have argued for its subversive and libertarian potential. Sensibly she points out that irony is "transideological" in that it can be given and received in both these modes. She shows through a wealth of examples across various art forms that irony can either purify deconstructively, or fellow-travel with ethically dubious ideologies, or wander ambiguously between these poles. It all depends on how it happens.

Consequently, Hutcheon presents irony as a culturally volatile commodity, and does not list it exclusively with either the forces of good or evil. The production and reception of irony is shown to be an edgy process, and the "politics" mentioned in the book's title do not turn out to belong to any particular faith or confession. The ironist can wear any coloured hat - black, white, beige, or whatever - and can defend or attack any set of sacred tenets. I suppose that this view fits Hutcheon's much confessed first-world liberalism, but it also fits the facts. Hutcheon shows this political edginess in action in her final chapter, where she traces the controversy over an exhibition entitled "Into the Heart of Africa" held at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, from November 1989 until August 1990. This exhibition showed the Museum's holdings of African material in what the exhibition's curator insisted was an ironic manner. As the catalogue makes clear, she intended it to criticise the colonial enterprise in Africa to which Canadians had contributed as soldiers and missionaries, and she simply did not have the material to give a thorough or accurate depiction of black African life (the Museum's collection had

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*Works Cited*