

Writing Humorous Fiction

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Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery.
Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Austen [1814] 1983: 375)

The best humorous writing, like the best magic act, appears to be almost effortless. The audience becomes so engrossed in the story unfolding that no one notices the sleights of hand until the unexpected happens, provoking the magic of laughter. Paradoxically, it's the effort, or craft, behind the writing that produces the illusion and the laughter.

Humour results from incongruous juxtapositions (Paulos 1977: 113). We read or listen to humour in expectation that we will be entertained in surprising ways. The simplest form of humour – the joke – aims to elicit laughter through an unexpected punch line; literary short stories and novels use humour to provoke insight, as well. Most jokes are expository, but they have a structure similar to that of a story (and to that of a magic trick). We meet the principal characters and conflict is introduced; tension is generated and builds; then comes crisis/revelation/punch line/surprise. Each of these elements is developed briefly, if at all. A joke or a comic sketch doesn't aspire to the complexity of a humorous story or novel. As American fiction writer John Dufresne notes, 'Jokes and anecdotes don't make good stories, though good stories can be inspired by them. Anecdotes do not explore or reveal character. Stories do' (Dufresne 2003: 162).

Vladimir Nabokov's interpretation of the purposes of writing is worth repeating here: the writer may be considered a storyteller, teacher, and/or enchanter (Nabokov 1980: 5). By orchestrating the classic aspects of fictional craft (characterisation, setting, plot, theme, and style), the writer of humorous fiction can simultaneously entertain, enlighten, and enchant.

So we begin our explorations in conjuring laughter. After a brief review of some theories of humour, we'll consider aspects of its fictional craft, focusing in particular on those related to creating character, setting, and plot. Each section on craft includes examples and exercises designed to help writers incorporate humour into their work. Books and stories are cited as examples in hope that you may be enticed to read the unfamiliar ones. In the end, there's no better way to learn to write humour than to read it.

Some general principles and theories

In medieval times, a humour was thought to be a fluid – blood, phlegm, choler, or bile – coursing through the human body, capable of influencing one's disposition. A person behaving oddly was suspected to have an imbalance or dominance of a particular fluid and was called a 'humourist' – a term later extended to those who wrote about odd behaviour.

Writing about oddities, or incongruities, seems a natural tendency. Unless you have a very fancy prose style, writing about the commonplace tends to be dull.

But why do we want to be funny? From a vast number of serious books addressing that question, I culled a list of reasons:

1. To keep the devils at bay
2. To commune with the gods
3. To celebrate the joy of existence
4. To lighten the burden of reality
5. To change the world.

Humour may seem benign or malicious. Theorists tend to find its origins in the darker sides of human nature. In the Bible, in Homer, and in many medieval tales, laughter often is associated with scorn and mockery. Aristotle found comedy far inferior to tragedy, and he considered laughter base and ignoble (O'Neill 1990: 34–5).

In *Sudden Glory*, Barry Sanders traces the history of laughter and deems it essentially ambiguous: 'Throughout time, laughter never shakes its dual character; it is always associated with both the devilish and the angelic, with both the positive and the negative' (Sanders 1996: 69).

Sanders, along with Kant and Kierkegaard, finds laughter a basic, universal response to an incongruous situation that surprises us, jars us out of the rut of civilised behaviour. Plato and Aristotle thought laughter stemmed from feelings of superiority over others. In *The Republic*, Plato expressed concern about the power of laughter to disrupt order even as he noted its usefulness as a means of moral reform.

Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud considered laughter a release of pent-up energy. In his early twentieth-century writings on creative writing, as well as those on humour, Freud stressed repressed instincts and emotions as the wellspring of the creative process. Sanders notes the power of the derisive laugh as a means of social subversion:

I call Freud the father of stand-up comedy because, through jokes, he articulated an acceptable way for the discontent, or marginal malcontent, to break the law, to upset the status quo, with impunity . . . Every comic is a social scofflaw who could be charged with breaking and entering – with breaking society's rules and restrictions, and with entering people's psyches. (Sanders 1996: 252–3)

In *Writing Humor: Creativity and the Comic Mind*, Mary Ann Rishel defines humour as 'playful incongruity', and says humour depends on departures from the logical and normal. But she notes that humour can go too far – beyond absurdity, nonsense, and silliness – to confusion and meaninglessness (Rishel 2002: 34–6).

Satire has classically been associated with using humour for a moral purpose. A great deal of literary fiction that attempts humour is satiric.

'Black humour', a term widely used to describe the work of writers as varied as Kurt Vonnegut and John Hawkes, goes beyond classical satire's penchant for moralising. It

focuses on a kind of cosmic irony by creating surreal worlds inhabited by one-dimensional characters. In 1939 André Breton used the term *humour noir* to describe the subversive power of writers (such as Poe, Nietzsche, Kafka, and Lewis Carroll) who take on subjects considered taboo in polite society (O'Neill 1990: 28).

No matter how subversive or moralistic your writing aims to be, it will usually be more effective if it incorporates humour. Humourless writing, like a humourless person, is difficult to tolerate for long.

Some elements of craft

Character

Historically, humorous characters have often enjoyed a shady reputation. Even when they embody moral principles, they've been dismissed as mere plot vehicles. The difference between a comic sketch and a humorous story often lies in the degree of complexity of the characters.

E. M. Forster wrote in *Aspects of the Novel*: 'Flat characters were called "humorous" in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed around a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round' (Forster [1927] 1995: 41).

Built around a single idea or quality (which often is exaggerated), flat characters don't change and never surprise us in realistic ways, as round (complex) characters do. Flat characters are a staple of satire and of black humour. As Forster notes, flat characters have one great advantage: they tend to be memorable by virtue of their very flatness. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), for instance, features an unforgettable protagonist who manages her life like a balance sheet, calculating the cost of every trick she plays and ultimately trumping the conventional morality she pretends to espouse. And Charles Dickens' schoolmaster Thomas Gradgrind, in the novel *Hard Times* (1854), will forever remind us of the folly of equating fact with wisdom.

More modern fiction uses humorous characters in more complicated ways, making us sometimes question Forster's notion of flatness and roundness. American novelist Joseph Heller's protagonist Yossarian, in *Catch-22* (1951), is flat in the sense that he doesn't change in the course of the novel – his circumstances are altered, but he remains essentially the same sceptical anti-hero, bent on surviving an absurd war and an absurd world. Yet Yossarian is capable of surprising us, often humorously. When he has an uncharacteristically sincere, romantic encounter with an Italian woman named Luciana, he professes love and proposes marriage (a surprise); Luciana offers him a slip of paper with her name and address on it, then retracts it, saying Yossarian will 'tear it up into little pieces the minute I'm gone and go walking away like a big shot because a tall, young, beautiful girl like me, Luciana, let you sleep with her and did not ask you for money'.

Yossarian protests; she relents and gives him the paper. Yossarian seems to have matured, from a callous young man who patronises prostitutes to someone embarking on a relationship that truly matters to him.

Then she smiled at him serenely, squeezed his hand and, with a whispered regretful 'Addio,' pressed herself against him for a moment and then straightened and walked away with unconscious dignity and grace.

The minute she was gone, Yossarian tore the slip of paper up and walked away in the other direction, feeling very much like a big shot because a beautiful young girl like Luciana had slept with him and did not ask for money. (Heller 1971: 167)

The double surprise, like so many in *Catch-22*, seems to put the reader and Yossarian right back where they started. Yet both are a little wiser as a result of this scene.

In *Money: A Suicide Note* (1986), British novelist Martin Amis uses his characters and his style as Heller does: to continually set up and dispel readers' logical and sentimental expectations. Amis's protagonist, John Self, often engages in dialogue with the reader. 'Memory is a funny thing, isn't it. You don't agree? I don't agree either. Memory has never amused me much, and I find its tricks more and more wearisome as I grow older' (Amis 1986: 30). Self is a consummate unreliable narrator; even he can't trust himself.

One of the essential traits of humorous literary fiction is a compelling protagonist. Both Yossarian and Self are highly effective protagonists, given their novels' grand designs. Yossarian, an Air Force bombardier, and Self, a commercial director and aspiring movie producer, defy the stereotypes associated with their respective professions. Yossarian is no typical war hero; he is selfishly and solely determined to prolong his own existence (arguably an act of heroism in itself), yet he commands the respect of his fellow soldiers. Self is not the slick, confident con-artist he imagines himself; rather, he's a dupe of others, constantly being conned, and he's at least partially aware of the con as it happens. Both of these characters have oddly endearing flaws: Yossarian's propensity to sit naked in trees, for instance, and Self's unceasing appetite for exaggerated quantities of junk food and alcohol, both of which habits he continually pledges to kick. By existing somewhere between flatness and roundness, these characters are sufficiently complex to haunt us long after we've finished their books.

Exercise: moving beyond the flat humorous character

Begin constructing a protagonist by listing characteristics associated with his or her professional stereotype. Say your character is a funeral director. You might list such adjectives as these: sombre, tall, gaunt, dark, bespectacled, plain-dressed and plain-spoken, brooding about eternity, given to playing classical music and driving black automobiles.

Now consider a character in a very different sort of profession: a disk jockey who spins records at a club. A list of this character's stereotypical aspects might include these: muscular, self-assured, shaven head, earrings, piercings, trendy clothing, fond of fast cars and fast relationships, living for the moment.

Blending the stereotypes is the first step in creating a more compelling protagonist: a muscular funeral director fond of piercings and fast cars, say, or a sombre disk jockey who broods about eternity. The second step is to introduce traits that blur the stereotypes further; let the funeral director be a gourmet vegetarian chef, say, and make the disc jockey addicted to watching TV shows about fishing or golf. Creating tension among your protagonist's passions is a useful way to build a humorous character.

Exercise: what's in a name?

The easiest way to make a humorous character fatally flat is give that character a too-cute name. The card game 'Happy Families' is rife with such names: Mr Snip the Barber, Mrs Bun the Baker's Wife. Names that seem incongruous with the character's profession tend to be funnier: in real life I've encountered a realtor named Pirate and a doctor named Risk, not to mention a fund-raiser named Death.

Other names may strike you as funny for no reason in particular. It's not a bad idea to begin keeping a list of names with humorous potential. Daily newspapers and telephone directories are good sources. In a quick scan of my local directory, the following names caught my eye: Wayne Spelk, Damon Stankie, Betty Almond, Melanie Gooch, and J. P. Pronto. (I cheated and put different first names with last names, and so should you, to avoid unduly embarrassing anyone.)

Setting

Sometimes setting is so important to a story that it acts as a character does: as an agent of action that advances the plot. In humorous fiction, setting is also used as a means of displacement. A character at odds with a particular world tends to be either tragic or comic. When Adolf Hitler is a character in a novel set in Liverpool (Beryl Bainbridge's *Young Adolf*, 1978) he manages to be both.

Cold Comfort Farm (1932) is a good example of using setting both as character and as plot catalyst. The Sussex countryside entraps and manipulates the Starkadder family; when the sukebind weed is in bloom, some characters are helplessly driven to fornicate. Author Stella Gibbons used a florid prose style to great advantage, and even went to the trouble of putting stars next to her most overwrought passages to help readers and reviewers tell 'whether a sentence is Literature or whether it is just sheer flapdoodle' (Gibbons 1978: 8–9). The following excerpt rated two stars:

**Dawn crept over the Downs like a sinister white animal, followed by the snarling cries of a wind eating its way between the black boughs of the thorns. The wind was the furious voice of this sluggish animal light that was baring the dormers and mullions and scullions of Cold Comfort Farm. (32)

The farm and its environs provide a challenge for protagonist Flora Poste, a model of commonsensical English gentlewomanliness, who goes to battle with gothic nature itself in her efforts to reform the Starkadders.

In *Scoop* (1938), Evelyn Waugh contrives to put his protagonist, John Boot, in a setting entirely at odds with his sensibility. Boot, self-professed Countryman and nature columnist, given to writing sentences such as 'Feather-footed through the plashy fen passes the questing vole' (Waugh 1999: 25), is mistakenly sent to Ishmaelia in Northern Africa to serve as war correspondent for the *Daily Beast*. Utterly the wrong man for the job, Boot's bumbblings bring him improbable success – of a sort – and allow Waugh to satirise war coverage in general and the English press in particular.

Other writers of humorous fiction opt to use setting as definition and reinforcement for their characters. In the 1980s and 1990s, Lewis Nordan and James Wilcox each published several novels set in the American South in which setting is depicted sensually and sincerely (albeit humorously) as a formative force in characters' lives. During the same period, John Irving and Richard Russo were writing fiction set in the American Northeast. My first satiric novel, *Lisa Maria's Guide for the Perplexed*, was set in a fictionalised version of my hometown. These works all use a sense of place in humorous ways to evoke characters' moral, social, ethnic, and political identities and conflicts.

Whether you choose to use setting as contrast or complement to character, remember that specific sensory details are critically important in creating a vivid fictional world.

Exercise: our house, in the middle of our street

Choose the place you lived longest while you were coming of age. Draw a map of the house and make a list of rooms. List the objects, colours, sounds, textures, and smells that you associate with each room. Finally, write a scene set in one of the rooms, featuring a character or two very unlike the actual people who lived there. Putting unfamiliar characters in familiar places is an effective way to generate humorous tension.

Exercise: products of one's environment

Create a setting whose nature embodies some of the important traits of your protagonist. Make a list of your character's principal descriptors, and then try to list an element of setting that conveys each one. Showing your character through setting reduces the need for exposition, and it's far more interesting to the reader to be shown, not told, the nature of your protagonist.

Plot

Humorous plots often involve exaggeration, mistaken identity, reversal of fortune, and the meeting of opposites. Odd characters in strange situations and settings tend to generate plots – sequences of actions – all by themselves.

Avoid planning your story's plot too far in advance of writing. One student of mine liked to outline his short fiction, much as he did his essays; the results were wooden. It's fine to have a destination in mind for your characters, but don't be surprised if they change their minds along the way and never reach it.

To consider the range of possibilities with plot, let's look at three classic stories involving dogs: Mark Twain's 'The Grateful Poodle' (1878), Dorothy Parker's 'Mr. Durant' (1944), and Anton Chekhov's 'Kashtanka' (1887).

Twain's story is the simplest of the three: a kind of parable about a physician who one day treats a stray poodle's broken leg. Next day the poodle returns with another stray dog with a broken leg; the physician mends it. In ensuing days the physician treats an exponentially growing number of dogs with broken legs. Finally, when the mass of needy dogs far exceeds his (and his newly-hired assistants') abilities, he decides to shoot them. But as he goes forth with his gun, he happens to step on the tail of the original poodle, who bites him. A month later, the physician, on his deathbed as a result of the bite, proclaims to his friends: 'Beware of books. They tell but half of the story. Whenever a poor wretch asks you for help, and you feel a doubt as to what result may flow from your benevolence, give yourself the benefit of the doubt and kill the applicant' (Twain 2002: 714). Then the physician dies. (Are you laughing yet?) Like many moral tales, this one is largely expository, with its satiric moral neatly spelled out at its end. Development of character and setting are sketchy at best.

Dorothy Parker's 'Mr. Durant' also has a moral, but it's slightly more embedded in the story's plot. The title character is a chronic womaniser, a married family man who recently impregnated one of his secretaries. After paying for her abortion, he goes home, ogling fresh possibilities on his way, to find that his children have taken in a stray dog. They beg him to be allowed to keep it, and in a benign mood engendered by his skilful dispatch of his secretary, he promises to let it stay. But soon afterward he is disgusted to discover that the dog is female. He tells his wife, 'You have a female around, and you know what happens. All the males in the neighborhood will be running after her' (Parker 1973: 46). Durant reassures his wife that his children won't think he's broken his word; he'll simply get rid of the dog while they're sleeping.

The parallels between Durant's treatment of his secretary and his dog give this satirical story a rather rigid structure, relieved only by Parker's authoritatively detailed depiction of her protagonist's thoughts and actions.

The Chekhov story has the same ingredients of the first two: characters, a moral message, and a dog. But here we find more complex development of our protagonist, a mongrel who resembles a fox. Kashtanka, lost by her abusive owner, is found by an animal trainer and transported to a world of relative luxury. She consorts with a trained gander and a clever pig, as well as a snob of a cat, and has a nice dinner every evening. But when Kashtanka herself is taught to do tricks, performs in public, and is reclaimed by her original owner (a drunken carpenter), she readily leaves her exciting new life to resume the derisive neglect of her original owner. And her time away seems to her only a dream.

Without humour, all of these stories would be unbearably bleak. With humour, their serious themes gain significant dramatic power.

Defining the theme of a work of fiction is a task some authors avoid completely. But, if pressed, many writers of contemporary humorous fiction would admit that their themes involve some sort of alienation. A writer pal of mine says all of his stories have the same theme: 'Us versus death'.

Whatever notion of theme you may have, let it inform your writing style. Martin Amis's and Joseph Heller's depictions of absurd, even surreal, worlds are reinforced by their use of consecutive contradictory sentences and scenes. Lewis Nordan's celebration of the pervasive power of the Mississippi Delta on its inhabitants is lyrically conveyed through his lush, idiosyncratic prose style.

Exercise: seeing the forest as well as the trees

You've finished writing a first draft of a story or novel and are ready to revise. Writing a synopsis of the work will help you see its plot in clear relief. List the key fictional events on index cards, one per card. Tape the cards to a flat surface, arranging their respective heights to reflect rising or diminishing dramatic tension. Do you see anything resembling a dramatic arc? If not, move the cards around. If no arc emerges, consider rewriting or reordering scenes. Consider opposites: what might happen, for instance, if your character stayed home instead of running away? What if, instead of heartbreak, the protagonist found requited love – but with the wrong person?

A final exercise

A challenge for aspiring writers of humour is to keep a diary, over a period of three or four days, listing every incident that makes them laugh. (Good luck.) Such a list may provide inspiration for one's fiction – or, at the very least, some insights into one's own warped psyche. Be forewarned that the act of keeping the list may inhibit laughter.

For most of us, laughter is a necessary part of our daily conversations with the world – a physiological response to situations that may be social, political, or downright silly. If you ever meet someone who never laughs, keep a close eye on that person; at the very least, he or she might be worth writing about.

Note

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