Learning to Write Comedy.

or

Why It's Impossible and How to Do It.

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Writing comedy is a real pain, made more painful by two persistent myths. The first is that writing comedy is a hoot, something people do for fun when they've written too much serious stuff, and that the main problem is to stop laughing so hard you can't type. While reading comedy may be an amusing experience, writing it is the same pain in the neck as any other kind of writing, only more so. It's a lot like ballet--on stage it's all pink tulle and graceful lifts, but in practice it's mostly sweat, corns, and ripped ligaments. Ditto comedy, especially the corn part.

The second myth (which apparently everybody believes) is that comedy can't be analyzed, that looking at it too closely kills it. This ridiculous notion seems to have evolved from the deadly results of attempting to explain a joke, though it does not take into account the fact that the reason the joke had to be explained in the first place was that it wasn't funny.

Wherever these myths came from, they're just not true. The Marx Brothers, those supposedly spontaneous crazies, used to write the scripts for their movies and then take them on the road to try out the humor on an audience, revise and rework the routines, polish up the jokes, and look for dead spots. It didn't kill their comedy, did it? And you didn't notice Harpo collapsed in (silent) mirth at his own jokes, did you? No, he was too busy cutting off people's ties and handing people his leg.

There's no step-by-step method for writing humorous fiction (Step 4: Insert clever wordplay every sixth line) and no easily learned formula. It's not possible to be taught to write comedy-I doubt if it's possible to be taught to write anything--but that doesn't mean you can't learn. And the way to learn to write comedy is to watch and read comedies and analyze what you're watching and reading.

I need to explain something before we go any farther. To my mind, writing comic science fiction is no different from writing any other kind of comedy. Actually, I don't see any difference between writing any kind of science fiction and writing anything else, an attitude that has gotten me in trouble from time to time. I will be using some examples from science fiction stories, but I believe firmly that if you want to learn to write something, you should study the masters, and the masters, to my way of thinking, are Shakespeare, Mark Twain, P. G. Wodehouse, and Jerome K. Jerome. Jerome's Three Men in a Boat is possibly the funniest book ever written, Mark Twain was a comic genius, Wodehouse devoted his entire career to comedy, and Shakespeare knows everything. Which is why I use them as examples along with science fiction writers.

After you've read a bunch of comedy, you'll see that why it's funny (if it is funny) is due largely to the comic bag of tricks the writer uses and has nothing to do with the situation at hand.

Hollywood has never figured this out. They constantly make the mistake of thinking that the only thing required for a comedy is a funny situation. "Let's have Chevy Chase slip and fall in the mud," they say, or "Let's have Dolly Parton and Meryl Streep play twins." You've all seen these movies.

A funny situation is never enough, mostly because there is no such thing as a comic situation. The situations that occur in comedies are the exact same situations that occur in dramas. And tragedies. And TV cop shows· And Shakespeare. He used to, in fact, use the same plots for his comedies and tragedies. His starcrossed lovers in Romeo and Juliet, where no one was laughing, appear again as Bottom/Pyramus and Flute/Thisbe in A Midsummer Night's Dream and the hopeless twits Hero and Claudio in Much Ado About Nothing.

People fail to communicate, quarrel, get arrested for crimes they didn't commit, get lost, run for political office, search for gold, die, and all of this can be either high drama or low comedy. It all depends on the techniques used. These techniques range from high satire to low burlesque, with all sorts of wordplay and high jinks in between. And the most important technique of comedy is language.

No, that's not stating it strongly enough· Language is the life blood of comedy. Serious prose can get by if it is merely serviceable and moderately clear· Comic prose can't. It must be perfectly clear, and consistently amusing besides.

Everyone's heard jokes badly told: "So then St. Peter said to the farmer's daughter, 'I was talking to the duck,'--no, wait. That isn't how it goes. Anyway, it was something to do with a duck.., or was it a turkey?" If the setup for the joke isn't perfectly clear, the point will be missed completely. And a great deal of comic writing depends not on punchlines but on conjuring up a funny picture in the reader's mind, and here language is everything.

In Roughing It, Mark Twain describes how a camel had eaten his overcoat:

…after he was done figuring on it as an article of apparel, he began to contemplate it as an article of diet. He put his foot on it, and lifted one of the sleeves out with his teeth, and chewed and chewed at it, gradually taking it in, and all the while opening and closing his eyes in a kind of religious ecstasy, as if he had never tasted anything as good as an overcoat in his life. Then he smacked his lips once or twice, and reached after the other sleeve. Next he tried the velvet collar, and smiled a smile of contentment that it was plain to see that he regarded that as the daintiest thing about an overcoat. The tails went next, along with some percussion caps and cough candy, and some fig paste from Constantinople.

Jerome K. Jerome's Three Men in a Boat, having forgotten their can opener, try to open a tin of pineapple:

Then Harris tried to open the tin with a pocket knife, and broke the knife and cut himself badly; and George tried a pair of scissors, and the scissors flew up, and nearly put his eye out. While they were dressing their wounds, I tried to make a hole in the thing with the spiky end of the hitcher, and the hitcher slipped and jerked me out between the boat and the bank into two feet of muddy water, and the tin rolled over, uninjured, and broke a teacup.

As in all writing, the detail work is everything. Comic writing has to be specific, using those minor, telling details that make us see the whole picture clearly.

But language is not only essential to comedy, it's fun, and writers indulge in all sorts of extravagances of language just for the heck of it, as when Ron Goulart is relating the Martians' explanation of why Mars was in the middle of a depression:

Instead of... building up comforting supplies of zugbeams, or what we would call deathrays, he had foolishly poured the taxpayers' money into Yerb, which is something like our social security. ("The Yes-Men of Venus")

Comedy writing uses all sorts of linguistic special effects, from Wodehouse's creative comparisons:

… he sat motionless, his soul seething within him like a Welsh rabbit at the height of its fever.

("Tangled Hearts").

to Carol Emshwiller's unusual descriptions:

… and one looks like Wanda Landowska, and two look like versions of the young Frank Sinatra while another looks like the elderly version.

("As If").

to Jerome K. Jerome's surprising metaphors:

I never see a steam launch but I feel I should like to lure it to a lonely part of the river, and there in the silence and the solitude, strangle it. (Three Men in a Boat) to Shakespeare's complicated wordplay:

MESSENGER: I see, lady, the gentleman is not in your books.

BEATRICE: No; an he were, I would burn my study.

(Much Ado About Nothing)

Which brings us to the pun. Most people groan at them, some feel they are a powerful argument for the reinstatement of capital punishment, and some are, unfortunately, addicted to them.

I take sort of a middle position on puns. Hanging seems too severe. Say five years to life. They are a true form of wordplay-I mean, Shakespeare used them--and they make wonderful tities, but they should be as clever as possible and should never be expected to carry a story all by themselves·

Neither should funny names and words, though they can be a lot of fun. Wodehouse

delights in naming his characters things like Psmith ("the p is silent, as in pshrimp") and the Empress of Blandings (a pig) and his settings Towcester Abbey (pronounced Toaster), and Shakespeare got a lot of mileage out of Dogberry's inability to use the right word:

DOGBERRY: Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship.

LEONATO: Take their examination yourself and bring it to me. I
am now in great haste, as it may appear unto you.

DOGBERRY: It shall be suffigance.

(Much Ado About Nothing)

But Shakespeare didn't try to write Much Ado About Nothing without lots of other kinds of comic writing, and without the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick. They never met without there being "a skirmish of wit between them," and their dialogue, unlike puns and silly names, does carry the story.

Characters in comedy, like Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, love to talk piffle. They love to talk, period. And they do. Wodehouse's Bettie Wooster novels are one long, astonishing monologue, an assault on the ears and good sense, and Heinlein, though not usually thought of as a writer of comedy, had several narrators who were talkative, smart, and witty, including Kip Russell in Have Spacesuit, Will Travel:

... I stacked a pyramid of Skyway Soap on each end of the fountain and every cake was accompanied by a spiel for good old Skyway, the soap that washes cleaner, is packed with vitamins, and improves your chances of Heaven, not to mention its rich creamy lather, finer ingredients, and refusal to take the Fifth Amendment.

Characters in comedy don't just talk, they expound and chatter and banter and orate and prattle, bringing far more energy and enthusiasm to their conversations than is probably necessary, with the delightful result that their dialogue ranges from rambling--

She was a good soul--had a glass eye and used to lend it to old Miss Wagner, that hadn't any, to receive company in; it warn't big enough, and when Miss Wagner warn't noticing, it would get twisted around in the socket, and look up, maybe, or out to one side, and every which way, while t' other one was looking as straight ahead as a spyglass. Grown people didn't mind it, but it most always made the children cry. (Roughing It by Mark Twain) to witty:

BEATRICE: I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick.
Nobody marks you.

BENEDICE: What, my dear Lady Disdain? Are you yet living?

BEATRICE: Is it possible Disdain should die while she has such meet food to feed it as Signior Benedick?

(Much Ado About Nothing).

to unfriendly:

"Hullo, aged relative," I began, as suavely as I could manage. "Hullo to you, you young blot on Western civilization," she responded.

(The Catnappers, by P. G. Wodehouse)

to thickheaded, as when William S. Hart attempts to explain that they are dealing with the undead in Howard Waldrop's "Der Untergant des Abendlandesmenschen":

"... er, ah, vampires..."
"You mean," asked Billy, "like Theda BaraY'

You will notice that the above contains a joke, which brings us to another matter.

A lot of people have the idea that writing humorous fiction is just writing a series of jokes. For awhile in science fiction there were a number of short short stories called Ferdinand Feghoots (after the hero of R. Bretnor's versions of this sub-subgenre). The story would at first appear to be a science fiction story, complete with characters and a plot (one of my favorites, which I suppose is not strictly a Feghoot, since it's by Damon Knight, was about a vegetable vampire that sucked the juice out of celery and carrots), but when you got to the end of the story, you realized you had been had and the last line was actually a punchline, or even worse, a pun (in the case of the veggy vampire, they drove a steak through his heart), and the whole story had been nothing more than a very long joke. The Ferdinand Feghoots received a great deal of criticism, although I always sort of liked them, and some editors refused to buy them. They still pop up now and then, and the editors still refuse to buy them.

The problem with the Feghoots (besides the awfulness of some of the puns) was that the story was not a story. It was merely a setup. These setups were ingenious and often very funny, but with a joke, the only thing that matters is the punchline, and the setup is nothing more than a means of getting to it.

Comedy writing means jokes, certainly. And setups, and wordplay and banter and funny names and clever dialogue, but it also tells a story that exists for its own sake and makes the reader laugh not lust at the gags but at the world the writer has created.

This world is frequently an exaggerated version of our own-as Jerome says, "a really quite likely story, founded, to a certain extent, on an all but true episode, which had actually happened in a modified degree some years ago." Exaggeration is a staple of comic fiction, the turning up of the volume on the truth to point out the humor inherent in it.

When Harris, one of the Three Men in a Boat, goes into Hampton Court Maze, he

doesn't just get lost, he manages to lose an entire squad of people along with him, "people who had given up all hope of ever getting in or out, or of ever seeing their home and friends again," and when the keeper finally comes to rescue them, he gets lost, too. Mark Twain is, of course, the master of exaggeration:

In the space of one hundred and seventy-six years the Lower Mississippi has shortened itself two hundred and forty-two miles. That is an average of a trifle over one mile and a third per year. Therefore, any calm person, who is not blind or idiotic, can see that in the old Colitic Silurian Period, just a million years ago next November, the Lower Mississippi River was upward of one million three hundred thousand miles long, and stuck out over the Gulf of Mexico like a fishing rod.

(Life on the Mississippi).

The creation of exaggerated worlds, "if this goes on . . . ," is science fiction's natural domain, and many of the best comedies in science fiction are biting satires.

In "Stable Strategies for Middle Management," Eileen Gunn exaggerates the tendencies already in the business world to a point

where corporate types undergo bioengineering to actually become the insects they already resemble. Tom Disch's "The Santa Claus Compromise" tells the story of what happened when the last disenfranchised group, the five-year-olds, were given their civil rights, and Gordon Dickson's "Computers Don't Argue" is a classic cautionary tale.

There are moments when Damon Knight doesn't even seem to be exaggerating in "The Big Pat Boom," a story in which he relates what happened when the aliens came to earth on vacation and the only souvenir they were interested in was the cowpat. His tale of the ensuing opportunism, greed, and general silliness seems entirely plausible.

The flip side of exaggeration is of course understatement, the turning down (or even off) of the volume. Great effects can be achieved by leaving out details and downplaying what might be gleefully described.

Understatement is the equivalent of the deadpan delivery of a comedian. Benedick proposes to Beatrice: "Come and I will have thee, but by this light I take thee for pity," and Beatrice (who is as crazy about him as he is about her) answers, "I would not deny you, but by this good day, I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption."

Even though Bertie Wooster's adventures frequently involve shinnying down drainpipes, stealing cow creamers, and perching on top of chiffoniers, Wodehouse never raises his voice:

I sat up in bed with that rather unpleasant feeling you get sometimes that you're going to die in about five minutes.

(The Code of the Woosters).

After Jerome's Harris has gotten his group thoroughly lost, he gets out his map again:

but the sight of it only infuriated the mob, and they told him to go and curl his hair with it. Harris said that he couldn't help feeling that, to a certain extent, he had become unpopular.

Sometimes Jerome not only understates, he omits, as in the battle of the pineapple tin:

Then we all got mad. We took that tin out on the bank, and Harris went up into a field and got a big sharp stone, and I went back into the boat and brought out the mast, and George held the tin and Harris held the sharp end of his stone against the top of it, and I took the mast and poised it high up in the air, and gathered up all my strength and brought it down.

It was George's straw hat that saved his life that day. He keeps that hat now (what is left of it), and, of a winter's evening, when the pipes are lit and the boys are telling stretchers about the dangers they have passed through, George brings it down and shows it round, and the stirring tale is told anew, with fresh exaggerations every time. Harris got off with merely a flesh wound.

Harris may be exaggerating, but Jerome is leaving it strictly to our imaginations, and it's much funnier than any description he possibly could have given us.

Both exaggeration and understatement are funny because of their inappropriateness to the situation, the unexpectedness of the writer's response to what is happening, and it is this that is the essence of comedy.

It refuses to take things seriously--or rather, it refuses to take the same things as the rest of the world takes seriously, seriously. "Nick and Jane were glad that they had gone to see the end of the world because it gave them something special to talk about at Mike and Ruby's party," Silverberg writes in "When We Went to See the End of the World," and we think "That's not funny," which of course is exactly why it is.

Comedy refuses to be awed by anything, it takes all the wrong things seriously, it turns ideas and attitudes on their heads, and it makes connections where there obviously aren't any. All of this is called divergent thinking and is what Gracie Allen made a career out of. And Wodehouse:

"Tell me, Egbert," he said, "who would a tall, thin chap be?"

Colonel Wedge replied truly enough that he might be anyone-except of course, a short, stout chap.
(Full Moon)

The reader is led to expect one thing and gets another. Oscar Wilde is the acknowledged king of deceiving you into thinking you know what he plans to say. Aphorisms like "A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies" and "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it" are brilliant examples of ruined expectations, and oddly enough, instead of being disappointed or angry at being deceived, we laugh at the incongruity.

And at the underlying truth, as when Mark Twain talks about "all the modern

inconveniences," and says solemnly, "It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress." (Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar)

Comedy is in this sense very much like mysteries. It deals in misdirection, in playing on our assumptions and then using them against us. Sentences start out going one direction and end up going another--

BENEDICK: I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes, and moreover, I will go with thee to thy uncle's.

--and words appear in sentences where you never expected them to be:

Our electric pads have rendered the hot water bottle obsolete. Three speeds... Autumn Glow, Spring Warmth, and Mae West.

(Ring for leeyes, by P. G. Wodehouse).

Divergent thinking is not so much a comic technique as a skewed way of looking at the world, a slightly off-center perspective science fiction has always had.

Only in science fiction could you find Howard Waldrop's "The Night of the Cooters," irt which H. G. Wells's Martians make the mistake of landing in Texas, where men are men and the Sheriff won't put up with any nonsense, or Alfred Bester's "Will You Wait?" in which a man can't even sell his soul to the devil because of bureaucratic red tape.

In Robert Sheckley's "Pilgrimage to Earth," the hero, tired of his logical life, goes to Earth to find love. When he asks one of the locals where true love can be found:

"Walk uptown two blocks," the little man said briskly. "Can't miss it. Tell 'em Joe sent you."

Divergent thinking permeates comedy, from Shakespeare to R. A. Lafferty's "The Hole on the Corner" and Fredric Brown's "Puppet Show," and is the very essence of comedy. It is also nearly impossible to describe. Individual lines can't convey it, and many very funny comedies have almost no funny lines at all. The humor comes from the entire piece, from a sort of over joke that infuses the whole story and has a cumulative effect that is impossible to describe in an article like this. I'm not even sure exactly how it's accomplished, either, though it has something to do with running jokes and the ringing of unexpected changes on the same theme and cappers.

A capper is one final joke, the one that sends the reader over the edge. It's not necessarily the funniest joke in the piece, but that one last straw that breaks the camel's back. In movies and plays, people will frequently smile or giggle intermittently throughout a scene and then burst out loudly at the end. They are not really laughing at the capper. They are laughing at the cumulative effect of the entire scene, which somehow the capper has summed up.

After Harris's trials and tribulations in the maze, he describes how the old keeper finally came and let them out:

Harris said he thought it was a very fine maze, so far as he was a judge, and we agreed that we would try to get George to go into it, on our way back.

These lines are not nearly as funny here as they are when reading Three Men in a Boat, which is why articles like this on how to write comedy are ultimately doomed. It may also be another reason why that dissection-equals-death myth persists.

Which is why what I said at the beginning of this article holds-if you want to learn to write comedy, you have to read it and watch it, not in little snips like this, but the real stuff.

Go read Much Ado About Nothing, Three Men in a Boat, and all the P. G. Wodehouse you can get your hands on. Read Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi and Roughing It and The Innocents Abroad. Read Ron Goulart, Tom Disch, and Eileen Gunn, Kim Stanley Robinson's "Escape from Kathmandu," Damon Knight's "The Big Pat Boom" and "ERIPMAV," Asimov's "The Up-toDate Sorceror," and Shirley Jackson's "One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts." Read R. A. Lafferty and Robert Sheckley and Carol Emshwiller and both Freds (Brown and Pohl) and Howard Waldrop.

And pay attention. Try to see how the writers do whatever it is they are doing. It won't kill the comedy. I had to read all of this stuff again for this article. It was still funny. And the part in Three Men in a Boat where Harris tries to sing a comic song reduced me, as it always does, to helpless laughter.