

VIEWS

"Imagination is intelligence on a joy ride."

Writing humor is so hard it's not funny

BY JAMISON GREGG

"Good authors make writing look easy," the saying goes. But many of us know it's not so easy. That goes double for writing humor. It's so hard it's not funny.

Many writers wish to inject some humor into their work, whether it be novels, business memos, or emails. Some struggle with it. Even though you may be a funny person, that doesn't always translate into being funny in print.

Here's an exercise to demonstrate that difficulty. Think about how you would describe the setting you are in right now. Maybe you are sitting in your den or on a park bench. How would you depict your surroundings?

Now, describe the same setting in a way that makes your reader laugh out loud. Yeah, c'mon, c'mon, we're waiting. See what I mean? Describing that scene in comedic fashion requires quirky, clever, and unconventional thinking. A train wreck of the mind, actually.

There are several devices humor scriveners employ, and fortunately all can

be learned, practiced, and internalized. Devices range from satire, understatement, and exaggeration to surprise, slapstick, and misdirection.

Visualization helps. Phyllis Diller said, "My mother-in-law is so fat, one day she wore a gray dress and an admiral boarded her." Does that paint a picture?

Skilled authors utilize irony, perhaps the richest and most inexhaustible comedy source. Irony plays on that great divide between life as we wish it to be and life as it is.

Voltaire, the 18th Century French philosopher and wit, observed that life is absurd, but when we try to make sense of it, the doomed effort creates the best comedy.

Joseph Heller provides an example of comedic irony in his classic novel, *Catch-22* (1961), set during WWII.

Heller's protagonist discovers the Air Force rule that being declared insane is one way to avoid flying uber-dangerous combat missions. The catch is, you had to ask for an evaluation, and anyone who requested such to avoid flying clearly wasn't mad anymore.

The comic novel, novella, or short story provides an opportunity to layer the humor. An author can build comical

characters (caricatures), invent a crazy plot and funny scenes, then top it off with witty dialogue.

My most-beloved comic novel is "A Confederacy of Dunces" (1980), by John Kennedy Toole, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Another great one is "The Stench of Honolulu" (2013) by Jack Handey.

Thousands of studies and articles, academic and otherwise, exist on the subject of humor. Some address the question of whether a person is born with a certain sense of it or whether it must be acquired. Many of these authors—eggheads—claim we are born as blank tablets, there is no such thing as natural humor, and it all must be learned. I disagree.

I believe that we are born with a thirst for merriment. But as we age and are forced to come to grips with the gravity of an ever more complicated and dangerous world, the playful attitude of our youth is gradually squeezed out. The grim possibility of failure will wipe the smile right off your face.

Some view life through a lens of tragedy, some through a lens of comedy. For many people, writers included, a dour and sullen outlook is often the default mode. It's easier. My advice—don't take life so

seriously. You'll never get out alive!

The Harvard Business Review backs my theory. A 2014 article cites studies that show babies laugh over 400 times a day. If you are over 35 years old, you laugh, on average, 15 times a day.

Thus, I theorize, we are born funny! Joy is flogged out of us by this phenomenon called life, and it is incumbent upon us to fight to regain it. This is where learning is important.

"So where do I find humor?" you may ask.

You don't have to look very far if you look through a kaleidoscope. It's all around you. We, as a species, are awash in it. As long as you are observant and as long as you can compare new impressions with old ones, you'll never run out of material.

Three overarching suggestions to stimulate your inner comic:

- 1) Limber up your imagination
- 2) Relax rules of reason
- 3) Maintain a playful attitude.

Imagination is intelligence on a joy ride. Be quick-witted and seize the many opportunities life provides us every day. I dare you.

Writing funny is fun.