

What's So Funny?

Whenever you hear a stand-up comedian holler out in desperation, "These are the jokes!" what you're really hearing is a person saying, "I think these things I've told you are funny, why don't you?" Why don't we? Why don't we think the same things are funny? The simple answer is that the distance it takes to find humor in a situation is not universal.

For instance, I was in a video rental store (back when there still were such stores) when a customer was renting "The Big Lebowski." The clerk declared the movie the dumbest thing he'd ever seen and said he couldn't see why anybody liked it. I'd seen "The Big Lebowski" in my pal Musgrave's livingroom and watched him roll in the floor with laughter. What Musgrave thought was hilarious, the clerk thought was merely tedious. Here's a case where there was too much distance between the clerk as audience and story.

But the opposite can happen, too. Heard any good 9/11 jokes lately? There's a good chance you never will, that the events of 9/11 remain so tender in our consciousness that we'll never be able to laugh about them. Humor, then, might be a way of gauging how long it takes to bounce back from trauma. Here's a joke from the first space shuttle disaster, "How do we know Christa McAuliffe had dandruff? They found her head and shoulders on the beach." It doesn't necessarily matter if you found that funny, reader, but it does matter that somebody did, that somebody was able to distance himself enough from that tragedy to make a joke about it.

What this question of 'what's so funny' means for us writers is that gauging the distance required to make humor happen is perhaps the hardest job a writer has. Is Kafka funny? Is P.G. Woodhouse? How about Flannery O'Connor or Jane Austen? I suspect the answers vary with the reader. As I said, the distance required to find something funny is not universal.

The harder question, the better question is what effect does humor have on readers? And that, too, is both unpredictable and probably unexplainable though there are whole academic journals devoted to trying. Maybe laughter overrides our other emotional responses, disarms us of our prejudices and expectations.

Or maybe it merely confirms them. Old television sitcoms worked that way. Garrison Keillor's tales of Lake Wobegone work this way. The humor is predictable, therefore safe and comforting. The universe is laughable, but that's OK, because it's also orderly and we're part of that order. The humor is aimed outwardly and never at us. And it often affirms our notions of fairness and human kindness.

Let's try a harder example: Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Yes, this looks like a funny story. We have a stock sitcom family (beleaguered dad, bratty kids, passive mom, demanding granny) on a vacation trip and all the attendant

clichéd behaviors (kids' rudeness, dad's flying off the handle, getting lost). So far, so funny.

It's getting lost that begins the story's darker turn. Granny tips her contraband cat's basket, the cat leaps on dad's neck causing the car to crash—an almost Rube Goldberg chain of events. Even in crisis, the kids remain in character, brats to the end. Because the end is near. The Misfit and his fellow escaped convicts come along and once the granny recognizes him, he decides they'll have to die. And they are killed, executed in a flatly brutal fashion. Where did that funny family get to? And where did the humor leak out of the story? And what's that got to do with us readers whose distance on characters and events has suddenly shrunk nearly to zero. Yep, they were an unlikeable bunch, but did they really deserve to be led into the woods and shot? Even the baby?

I'd suggest that in the words of the Misfit, humor has "thrown everything off balance." We've been caught laughing at things that aren't laughable at all such as the whole question of the goodness referred to in the story's title. What does it mean to be good, readers? And how do we judge the granny's smug sense of goodness without being kind of smug ourselves? In the end are we any better than the quarrelsome family, and if we think we are, in what way are we deserving a better fate? Whew. Lots of laughs.

Milan Kundera wrote several novels with the question of laughter at their core. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, he plays with the dichotomy of angelic versus demonic laughter. But as he makes clear, those distinctions are not so simple. That demonic, destructive seeming laughter could be the key to opening our thinking out to different ways of looking at the world. Maybe, then, demonic laughter is the better kind of laughter?

I've always thought so. What I would hope laughter to do is to upend expectations, not affirm them, to disrupt our comfort and make us ill at ease. This kind of humor can be explosive, and when explosions happen, we are thrown in the air and come down in unexpected places. What to make of a novel like Will Self's My Idea of Fun wherein junkies are held up to us not as criminals or as suffering an illness, but as the ideal citizens of a consumer society? Or Kafka's The Trial? We follow Joseph K through maze of countless bureaucratic hoops, familiar and funny until it is not, until the run around drives Joseph to his unexplained, never understood death sentence. Life's like that.

Is it worth the risk for writers to make use of such a trouble-making tool? Reader alienation is the cost when humor misfires, and there are as many ways to misfire as there are readers. Still, I'd say the disruptive power of humor is one of a writer's most useful tricks. Use it with abandon; use it with care.