

## Writing Funny or ‘Getting It’: A Comic’s Lament

How do you write funny?

I’m certainly not the first person to struggle with this basic dilemma of humor, and I’m pretty positive that I won’t be the last. But here I am, talking to an audience (you, the readers) without *actually* talking to them, hoping somebody ‘gets’ it.

It’s a stupid idea, really.

It’s easy to perform a joke, because the humor is literally smacking its audience in the face. Maybe you don’t think the joke’s funny. That’s fine. That’s not the point. The point is, you know it’s a joke, and I know it’s a joke. The comedian and the audience have successfully understood each other.

But you can’t write funny, not really. You just write. The joke is unfinished. You leave it up to your reader to finish it, because they will hopefully understand why your joke is supposed to be funny. But you don’t write a complete joke, on paper, ever. Even if you think you do.

Take, for example, the phrase, “I went to my Grandmother’s funeral.” Nobody laughed at that, I hope. Not on paper, anyway. Because that sentence isn’t funny on its own. I need context for the joke. In other words, I need the set up, the back story. But even if I have a back story, even if I come up with a whole series of zany, ridiculous events leading up to punch line, my Grandmother’s funeral, I’m still not *completing* the joke. Because I would not typically say, “Get ready, here comes a joke!” in my writing. (Unless you’re on a website like jokes.com, in which case, I suggest...you get off that website and get a better sense of humor.)

What does ‘completing the joke’ mean? Well, if I walked up on stage and begin a stand-up act with the phrase, “I went to my Grandmother’s funeral” and if I said it with the right inflection and the right body language, if I was a skilled enough physical comedian, I might get you to laugh. That’s why a joke, by its very idea, is performative. If, on the other hand, I started a novel or essay with the phrase, “I went to my grandmother’s funeral” I would not be joking. Even if I *was* joking.

The issue with telling a joke is that there is a certain level of winking that goes on. The comic winks to the audience, not literally, but implicitly, to assure them that he or she is in fact ‘just kidding.’ (This is, of course, oftentimes an attempt to get oneself out of

trouble, especially when making an especially harsh observation about human behavior.)

But in writing, there is no ‘just kidding.’ Or maybe there is. But that’s the problem—the maybe. An otherwise intelligent person might completely miss written sarcasm because there are no physical cues accompanying it.

So, with all of these problematic discoveries in mind, why bother?

Because it’s twelve-thirty at night and I should be writing a paper on women in Medieval Islam? Because I’m irrational? Because I’m interested in giving it the old college try, even if there’s a good chance I’ll fail?

Yes.

Yes to all of these reasons.

See the joke I just set up there? Instead of giving you the clichéd answer you might expect, something along the lines of, “No, I do it because comedy is important and I’m important and I like to pat myself on the back and I’m a genius so listen to me,” I gave you “Yes.” It was an attempt at being subversive.

Maybe you understood it as a joke. Maybe you understood it as my version of the truth. Maybe you didn’t understand it. Maybe you understood it as a joke but did not especially find it funny. Maybe you’re sick of me already.

These are all acceptable answers in the realm of comedy writing. And what scares me, and I suspect scares any comic, aspiring or established, trying to put pen to paper, is this: if the audience ‘doesn’t get it’ then what the hell are we doing?

Or, alternately, if the audience does ‘get it’ but doesn’t especially like it, then why the hell are we doing it?

To conclude, I went to my grandmother’s funeral.