

Writers' Workshop

“A _____ Walks Into a _____:

Writing a Comic Scene”

Workshop led by Michael Little



*** Here are a few principles involved in creating a comic fiction scene:

1. **“Organized chaos”** - think random chaos, anything can happen; shake up the world and let your imagination run wild. But the writer then has to organize the scene (see #2 below).

2. **“Beginning, middle, and end”** - the old familiar three-part structure, which we can illustrate with the structure of jokes (setup, development, and punchline). Here’s a two-parter: “A horse walks into a bar” (setup) and “the bartender says ‘Why the long face?’” (punchline). If a minister, a priest, and a rabbi walk into a bar, however, we have material for a that middle part, development. Same with a comic scene in fiction: set it up, develop it, and finish with a strong ending.

3. **“Surprise and reversal”** - central to all comedy; surprising the reader; reversing the expectations. For example, “fish out of water” stories are all about reversal. We don’t expect to see a mermaid in Manhattan, but Darryl Hannah in *Splash* surprises and delights us.

4. **“Humor comes from character”** - a key principle, as humor is not something superimposed on the scene; the characters have real issues, real fears and desires, although they sometimes find themselves in fantastic and crazy situations. For more on character, see #5 below.

5. **“Help!”** - faced with challenges, all protagonists need help, and this is just as true in comic scenes; populate the comic scenes with a supporting cast; a sidekick character is a great assistant, supplying information and support and humor. In buddy movies, like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, there are two protagonists who share friendship and often humorous repartee. *Thelma and Louise* had their moments as well.

6. **“The comedy rule of three”** - in any series of three items, especially in dialogue, the third item is different, surprising, and funny. Also illustrated by the fact that there were three Stooges, not two (and three Amigos, not two), and the fact that a joke that begins with “a priest, a minister, and a rabbi” is by rule infinitely funnier than a joke that begins with just “a priest and a minister” (we need the rabbi!). Likewise, if we have only a brunette and a redhead in a doctor’s waiting room, we must add a blonde for the punch line! In a comedy team of two, however, there is typically a straight man (Abbott) and a funny man (Costello). In their famous “Who’s On First” baseball routine, Abbott explains to Costello that Who is on first base, What’s on second, and I Don’t Know is on third, and Costello’s growing confusion is classic and almost endless (and is shared by the third party in the scene, namely the audience).

7. **“This above all: to thine own self be true”** - follow your own sense of humor, your own comic view of the world, not someone else’s. Of course our own comic view has been shaped by all those who have made us laugh, which is a good and necessary thing. It’s easy to imagine a shared common pool of comic genes.

*** Let’s look at a fish-out-of-water **short short story** (“Inga of the North”) that consists of three short comic scenes.

*** **Writing exercise:** Write a short comic scene that begins with “A _____ walks into a _____.”