

and Sell
How to Write ^ Humor



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HOW TO WRITE HUMOR

By: Jim Foreman

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CHAPTER 1

SOME GOOD NEWS AND SOME BAD NEWS

So you'd like to write humor. You were the class clown and could break up everyone in the room except the teacher with a well-place remark. You like to tell jokes and be the life of a party. You think that it would be great fun to share your particular sense of humor with other people and the best way to do that is by putting it into written form. Once that you have done that, the only thing better would be to see it published, unless it would be to get paid for it. Well, I have some good news and some bad news for you.

The good news is that the editors of just about every magazine, from the Baptist Standard to Cattlemen's Gazette, state that they are always looking for good humor pieces for their publications. More than half of the listings in the Writers Market indicate that humor is one of the areas in which the editor would like to receive material. Even though Readers Digest receives around 15,000 separate submissions each month for their various humor columns, they are still looking for just the right story or quip. Needless to say, they are a very tough market to crack and one would probably find other fields much more fertile.

Some magazines editors want humor so badly that they are willing to pay more for it than for most any other type of article because they know that their readers always respond favorably to it. Humor in a magazine breaks up the tiresome monotony of article after article about the same subject. There are even a few magazines like Mad, Punch and Humor which have built their entire circulation on humor. Unfortunately for the freelancer, most of these publications have their own stable of writers and won't even consider outside submissions. It's claimed, probably with some foundation, that if someone sends something which is really good to the editor of one of these magazines, they are likely to hand the idea off to one of their staff writers to be re-written under his name.

When most people pick up a magazine, the first thing that they do is thumb through and read the cartoons, then turn immediately to the index to see if there are any humorous articles. Even though the basic content of most of these magazines may be rather specialized, they will often use general interest humor. If it wasn't for the cartoons and an occasional funny story, I'm sure that many of today's magazines wouldn't be around very long.

While attending a writing seminar recently, I asked a senior editor for one of the largest paperback publishing houses, "When you get back to your office Monday morning, what kind of manuscript would you like to find on your desk. What would really make your day?"

He answered, "I see so much pure crap come across my desk every day that a good, funny book that I could publish would not only make my day, it would make my month."

Many humorous books seem to be ageless and go through printing after printing. While they never seem to hit the best seller lists, they still enjoy a constant readership and keep popping up on bookstore shelves year after year.

So, if humor is so much in demand and the market for it wide open, then why isn't there more of it being written? This is where we come to the bad news part.

First of all, while most people who remember the old Dick Van Dyke show think that humor is usually written by a bunch of people sitting around, having lots of yucks and tossing off one funny line after another, they are in for a surprise. Writing humor is as serious and demanding as writing technical material, and in many cases, even more difficult. In technical writing, one must research the facts, get

them in proper order and put them down on paper in a readable manner. On the other hand, while writing humor tends to be more of an art form, it still must be set to a pattern which is just as precise as writing an article about calculating and evaluating the structural efficiency of a Warren Truss.

A cartoonist, to whom I occasionally sell a few gags, once said that there is no such thing as new or fresh humor. Anything which is worth telling has been told hundreds of times before and all that one has to do in order to sell anything in today's market, is to come up with a new twist to an old gag. This is basically true because I've seen the same gag applied to cartoons which span a hundred or more years. It's like the old joke, "Why did they have to close the zoo in Warsaw?" The punchline is, "Their clam died." That joke dates back at least 1500 years to when it was the hottest thing going around the Roman Empire, only then it was, "Why did the Visgoths have to close their zoo." The punchline was still the same, "Their clam died." This joke probably goes back a lot further than that, but who knows.

Most humor doesn't travel well. By that statement, I mean that something which is terribly funny in one place might fall flat in another. Something which is funny in a bar, more than likely, wouldn't be funny in a church. By the same token, church jokes are seldom ever funny anywhere except when delivered from a pulpit to a captive audience. Perhaps the reaction to a joke lies in what the audience is full of. A joke's difficulty in traveling is especially true when it comes to crossing national boundaries, even if they happen to speak the same language. What is funny in England, Australia or even Canada often isn't funny here and vice-versa. If it has to be translated to a different language, forget it!

About the only jokes which seem to survive crossing borders are the ethnic or cultural variety. The only thing which changes in the joke is the group about which it is being told. A joke about Texas Aggies becomes a Polish joke in Chicago, a Noofie joke in French-speaking parts of Canada and a Gringo joke in Mexico. The only problem is that while everyone seems to tell ethnic jokes, they are almost impossible to sell. I think that many of them smack too closely to the truth and no one likes to hear the truth about themselves. It has finally come to the point that it is nearly impossible to tell a joke about any particular segment of the population without drawing fire. Several people are sitting around in a bar and one of them says, "Did you hear the story about the two Jews?"

A man down the bar stood up and replied, "Look, I'm Jewish and I don't like jokes about my people."

The first guy said, "I'm sorry, I'll change it. Did you hear the story about the two Irishmen named Cohen and Goldberg?"

About the only people who are still safe to tell jokes about these days are white men between the ages of 40 and 50, who are neither fat, rich nor uneducated.

With all of the people around the country who must be writing and submitting humor to all of those anxious and waiting editors, then why isn't more of it being published. Editors in general are so jaundiced that they would have made great contestants on that old TV show called "Make Me Laugh". For those of you who don't remember that gem of a game show, it involved various guest comedians who would attempt to make contestants laugh by telling them jokes. If the contestant could hold a straight face for a couple minutes, they would win a refrigerator or something. Fortunately for all TV viewers, that show died after only a few weeks.

Editors seem to fall into two categories: either so old and set in their ways that it is difficult to get a rise out of them or else they are so new on the job that they are wondering if they will be able to hang on long enough to get business cards printed. No matter whether they are old or new to the job, they are all well aware of the fact that nasty letters come to the editor while the really vile ones and those from lawyers go straight to the publisher. The last thing that an editor wants to happen is to be called to the office on the top floor about something which they accepted or allowed to be published.

I once asked an editor how he went about deciding whether to accept a humor piece or not. He replied that if he liked it, he'd pass it around to all the other editors to read and if every one of them laughed, he might buy it. If any one of them didn't think that it was funny, it went back with a rejection slip.

Then he added, "However, if they all laugh too hard, it scares me and I'll also send it back."

Since most humor is usually slightly offbeat, even after an editor decides that he likes a piece, it is usually sent to the legal department to see if the lawyers can find anything in it that might get them sued. Even though it has passed muster with the editor, there is still a good chance that one of their legal eagles will lay a rejection slip on it. After all, how many funny lawyers have you ever seen.

Another problem in dealing with editors is one which can drive a humor writer right out of his gourd. Editors seem to feel that they are not doing their jobs unless they take a blue pencil to every piece that comes across their desk. It appears that from the way that they attack an article, they think that their readers are all idiots and everything has to be explained to them. No matter how careful a writer may have been to get the cadence and timing just right, some editor will either add or take out a few words here and there, effectively killing the situation which you so carefully created. There is an old saying that if a joke has to be explained, then it wasn't funny to begin with. By the same token, something which is really funny and can stand on its own, can be killed by adding a few useless words in the wrong place.

I sold a national magazine an article about television addiction. It was written very tight and needed to be read at a fast pace in order for the humor to flow. In one place, I said, "During the next six minutes, while good old J. R. Ewing swindled a dozen of his best friends, went to bed with five different women and had Sue Ellen committed to a Betty Ford center...." I figured that everyone who had ever seen a TV set was bound to know who J.R. and Sue Ellen were. When the article came out, the editor had stuck in "(Starring characters in the CBS Series, *Dallas*, which airs on Friday Nights at 8:00 PM in most time zones.)" right in front of the punch line. That broke the reader's train of thought and shot the whole joke down in flames. Remember this when you find the story later in the book to see how it destroyed the line of thought.

I have reprinted excerpts from a number of my published stories in this book, not so much to stroke my ego, but to use them as illustrations for some of the things which I will tell you about writing humor. Read them with a critical eye to see if you can catch some of the little writing tricks which I will pass along in the various chapters. I have no idea whether you will find them funny or not, but at least I was able to convince some editor that they were.

In this book, I will attempt to pass along some basic tricks used in creating humor which I have learned over the years. I will also try to help you decide whether what you have written is marketable or not. You notice that I didn't say whether it was funny or not, just if you could sell it. There's a lot of very funny stuff which will not sell and, unfortunately, there is also a lot of junk published today under the guise of humor, but most of which is totally unfunny.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS HUMOR AND WHY IS IT FUNNY

What is love?

Well, it's awfully hard to precisely describe the physical sensation of love, but basically it is a mental attitude and process which comes when a person finds himself in a very interesting situation which he anticipates will ultimately result in great pleasure. That anticipation is usually associated with increased blood pressure and respiration. Occasionally love will spring forth almost spontaneously but the greatest satisfaction usually comes after a certain amount of time and stroking, allowing it to develop and grow in intensity. Above all, the greatest pleasure can be found when love happens at the right time and in the right place.

What on earth does love have to do with humor?

Actually, the physical response to both lovemaking and humor are very similar although few people break out in laughter during lovemaking. Conversely, I have always found it to be rather difficult to generate much of an orgasm while laughing about something funny. A person involved in either of these situations finds great pleasure in savoring the moment while it builds to the ultimate climax, which is followed by a period of warmth and good feelings. Although humor and love may be similar in many ways, I've never heard of anyone getting pregnant from a good joke and by the same token, very few people experience heartbreak when a joke dies.

Humor, like love, usually comes from a situation in which a person is not only physically interested but is also mentally involved. Like love, the pleasure of humor can be experienced again and again if it is applied properly. In humor, there is always the right time and the right place for it to happen and should one of those two parameters be missing, there is little chance that the desired response to humor will result.

So what is humor?

Humor is the product of a surprise ending applied to a normal situation, and the more unusual the surprise ending, the more intense will be the humor. Charlie Chaplin best described what was funny. "You take a woman walking down the sidewalk. Show the audience a banana peel in front of her. Everyone knows that she is going to step on the banana peel and do a pratfall. At the last instant, she sees the banana peel, steps over it and falls into an open manhole that neither she nor the audience knew was there." However, there are limitations to both the situation and the surprise.

Take the most successful situation comedies on television, such as the Lucy Show, the Mary Tyler Moore Show and several others in which many people could relate to the situations which were depicted in the program. Although most of the situations were a bit on the ridiculous side, they were totally possible and believable. The humor in those shows was built on the surprise endings to those situations and was usually rather funny.

Any situation has to be believable and one with which the audience can relate. An example of this

is would be that few people who never played a round of golf would understand or appreciate most jokes about golfing. To a golfer, there is nothing funny about the clothing that they wear, simply because it is the accepted way that most of them dress. However, since the stereotype of plaid pants is so familiar, you will find that cartoonists always draw a golfer dressed like a rodeo clown. Most golfing jokes are based far more on the frustrations involved with the game than on the situation. Frustration is another area of humor which I will discuss further along.

Not only must the situation be logical and believable, but the same thing applies to the surprise ending or punchline. A golf ball which explodes when it is hit might be funny to a non-golfer but even the worst duffer knows that those trick exploding golf balls which show up from time to time. So to them, it wouldn't be funny, just silly. This isn't to say that something can't be both silly and funny. If both the situation and the surprise ending are equally silly and absurd, the whole result can be funny. In the proper context, even the silliest situation can be rather humorous.

*There was a young lady in France,
Who rode the trapeze without any pants.
When she'd swing high, way up in the sky,
All the men would jump up and dance.*

Now that was funny, or at least most normal people would think so. What makes it funny? It's that silly last line. I can think of at least half a dozen last lines, some of which are downright vulgar. They might all have the proper rhyme and pace; but none of them would come close to being as funny as this one. It's that silly mental picture created by the last line which makes it work.

Most, if not all limericks are based on total nonsense with both the buildup and the punchline being equally as silly. If either portion was allowed to become too serious or logical, the whole joke would go out the window. Silly humor has to be sudden because if it was allowed to last more than a few seconds, the reader would realize just how absurd it was and the moment of humor would be lost. Also, it would be nearly impossible to produce humor from this type of situation if one were to try to write it any other form. If you don't believe me, just try to rewrite this, or any limerick into a narrative form and see if you can make it equally funny.

One of the oldest foundations to play humor against is conflict. I don't mean conflict which leads to blows, but simply mental or situational conflict. It can be man against man, man against machine or even man against some outside influence such as weather, government or society. Humor comes from allowing the man to think that he is about to win and then pull the rug out from under him. Chase someone up a tree and chop off the limb. When he hits the ground, you have what is known as Whiz-bang humor. The old pie-in-the-face or being hit by a flying brick might have been funny stuff back during the depression, but we have to be a bit more sophisticated any more. When you chopped off the limb and let the guy drop, let him fall into water--then throw him a life saver which deflates just as he reaches for it. You can even take the story a bit further. Just as he is about to go down for the third time, his faithful dog leaps into the water and swims to him. Instead of saving him, the dog bites him and swims back to shore with the deflated life saver.

There is just so far that you can take something like this. You can't kill the off the poor soul, just keep him dangling with a little hope that things will get better. If you don't provide that little ray of hope, the audience will feel sorry for him and everyone knows that there is no humor in sorrow.

Frustration is often the basis for its own form of humor but one must be very careful how he handles it. In this form of humor, it is always the person who is a witness to the frustration who will find

any humor in it, not the person who is involved. Actually, the witness finds it humorous because it makes him feel superior. This form of humor works only on situations in which a person has knowingly placed himself in the frustrating environment rather than where he is being frustrated by something which he cannot control. A golfer standing knee deep in a water trap wasn't forced to place himself in that position. He could drop the ball on dry land and take a penalty, or he could have avoided the situation completely by staying at home and cutting the lawn. One might say that the golfer is not being degraded but is simply getting what he deserved.

One should avoid any humor which is based on frustrations which are neither self-created nor deserved. Take for instance all of those little moron jokes which were going around several years back. Naturally, it is still possible to find sick individuals who find humor in what has come to be known as cruelty jokes, but they are getting to be fewer in number all the time. This is a type of humor, which is far beneath the abilities of most writers, and should never be used in order to get a cheap laugh.

Another form of humor is based on pomposity and one which is fair game to everyone. After all, what could be more fun than deflating a pompous ass. These people are human whoopee cushions which need to be sat upon at every opportunity. Most of these people are so self-centered that often, they will save you the trouble of writing a suitable punchline by doing their own verbal pratfalls. I'll never forget the time when Dwight Eisenhower stepped to a microphone and began to move his lips without any sound coming from the public address system. After a couple more attempts to be heard over the speakers, he turned to an assistant at the same instant that the sound man found the right switch to flip and over the speakers came the booming voice of the president, "This son of a bitch doesn't work."

There is an instant vision in the mind's eye of the stereotyped pompous ass. Fortunately for the humor writer, there is a whole range of people who fit into this category. They are most often found under the heading of the rich, powerful, famous, or those who are in a position to control other people. At the head of that long list are the elected politicians, who have been fair and open game for humor writers for thousands of years. The bigger that they are, the bigger target that they present. All that the writer has to type is, "Senator Batson Belfrey stepped to the microphone.....," and every reader will instantly be with him. He doesn't have to describe the senator any further nor does he have to set the stage past that one statement. In fact, he is much better off to simply set the idea of the situation and leave the rest up to the reader's mind. Everyone will see an overweight, overdressed, overbearing and a totally obnoxious man in their mind's eye. The reader's instant concept of your subject is far more vivid than anything which you could ever put on paper. They have mentally placed him in the same position as a blindfolded man in front of a firing squad and are waiting in anticipation for you to pull the trigger. From this point, the writer can go in just about any direction which he selects for the punchline.

It isn't that I'm a sexist or chauvinistic when it comes to connecting pomposity with the male gender because many, if not most, females in the same position are on an equally long ego trip. Evidently, it is because chivalry isn't totally dead when it comes to poking humor at them. In today's society, while a woman politician might be just as pompous and obnoxious as her male counterpart, she still enjoys some shelter from her gender. She will know that she has finally reached total equality when she sees a cartoon of herself in which she is depicted as being at least a hundred pounds overweight, dressed in an ill-fitting plaid suit and smoking a cigar.

Up to this point, we have discussed humor directed at another person or situation. Now we come to another area which always makes good humor. This is self-directed humor in which a person makes himself the butt of the joke. In doing this, one can get away with far more than he would ever have been able to do had he been directing his arrows at another person. In fact, there is almost no limit to what a writer can do when he talking about himself. He can even exceed the bounds of reason if needed. Have

you ever noticed that some of the most popular standup comics use this type of humor. A good example was when President Reagan made a joke about his own age. He said something about when Lincoln was nominated for president and added, "That was my first Republican Convention." By joking about his own age, he brought the house down. Had anyone else attempted to use his age to make a joke, it would have come out mean, crude and not the least bit funny.

A short person can get away with making short people jokes where a tall person can't. Remember when Randy Newman, who stands a good six feet tall, recorded a very degrading song called "Short People". It drew the wrath of just about everyone shorter than what is considered to be normal height. Five foot tall Paul Williams could have recorded the same song without evoking a word of protest. Self-directed humor works only when the reader or listener can relate to you. In writing this type of humor, it is necessary to keep reinforcing the reader's identification with you in order to keep the humor going. Think how many times Rodney Dangerfield will say that he gets no respect during one of his routines.

The best way for a writer to test his humor is to write it down and set it aside for a few days. If the humor is still there when he reads it again with a critical and unjaundiced eye, then there is a fairly good chance that it might be funny to some other reader.

CHAPTER 3

CREATING HUMOR FROM SCRATCH

"No one can teach talent, but the practical skills of the professional writer's craft can certainly be taught." These aren't my words but those of Dwight V. Swain, Oklahoma University's professor emeritus in professional writing. Neither Dr. Swain nor I can teach the basic sense of humor which is required in order to write humor but for those who are lucky enough to have had that particular trait passed along to them via their genes, this book can be a roadmap for them to follow. It will teach the reader how to set up a situation, raise the interest of the reader and then spring the punchline. It will also teach how to develop the cadence and timing necessary to make it work.

Writing humor from scratch is much the same as making biscuits from scratch. Before you can mix up anything, you have to have the necessary basic ingredients in hand. Otherwise, it might turn out like the preacher who was attempting to get his congregation excited about building a new church. After ranting and raving at great length about how great it would be to have a new building and how the people could show their dedication to God by constructing a proper and fitting church, he ended it by saying, "All that is needed to build a new church is for one man to nail up one board."

As he stopped to gather his breath for a new onslaught, one of the men toward the back of the church, who was obviously more attuned with carpentry than symbolic rhetoric, spoke up in a loud voice, "What is he going to nail that board to, preacher?"

In creating humor, just as in constructing a building, one must have something already in place to which he can nail that first board. It is nearly impossible to produce a humorous situation without something solid to build on. Even famous one-liners such as, "Take my wife, please!" has to have a primary foundation for the humor to play against. There had to be a lead-up to the story, previous jokes about people or something similar in order for it to work. That is one of the reasons why most comedians have what is called a warm-up act to get the audience in the right frame of mind before they comes on stage. If the comic simply walked out on the stage and said the line, it wouldn't have been the least bit funny.

The best route to successful comedy is to begin with an interesting and believable story of some sort as a basis to build the humor around. Little pieces of humor can be sprinkled in the basic story like a spice, to let the reader know that more will follow. To illustrate this point, here is the original draft of the story which I sold to a national recreational vehicle and travel magazine. Its basis of the story is about breaking the television addiction for three months while touring Baja.

As you can see in the very first paragraph, I created the story line about television addiction, set up a conflict between the two people let the reader know that it was going to be a funny story. Once that this was accomplished, I could progress more fully into the humorous interplay between the situation and the punch lines.

GOING TUBELESS

By: Jim Foreman

I'm not sure when the Baja bug chomped down on me, but I suspect that it happened during a commercial in which a pickup truck was leaping from one sand mogul to the next across the Vizcaino Desert while an off-camera announcer raved on about how this rice-rocket had tamed Baja. During the next six minutes, while good old JR Ewing swindled a dozen of his best friends, went to bed with five different women and had Sue Ellen committed to the Betty Ford Center, I plotted how to break the news to the little woman who had promised to love, honor and adjust my vertical hold that I also wanted to tame Baja.

During the next commercial break, which involved a man who was offending everyone in his area code with under-arm odor until his girlfriend slipped him a stick of Industrial Strength Arrid, I made my move. "Darling," I said. "How would you feel about getting away from the cold weather this winter by spending three months in a place where we can lay on the beaches all day, soak up lots of sunshine and eat great food?"

"Where's that?" she asked, peeking over the edge of her TV Guide.

"I'll give you a hint. It's off the west coast of Mexico."

"Hawaii!" she shouted with such excitement that she dropped her remote control. "I've always wanted to spend a winter in Hawaii and live the lifestyle of the rich and famous."

"Well, the place that I have in mind isn't quite that far west. It's more like a couple hundred rather than a couple thousand miles. I thought that we'd load up the motorhome and spend the winter in Baja."

"Baja! That's another world. There's nothing down there except snakes, scorpions and Parnelli Jones," she fretted. "Besides, I hear that they don't even have HBO."

"Parnelli Jones only goes there to race in the Baja 1000, but Farrah Fawcett and Ryan O'Neal live there all the time," I countered.

"And Desi Arnaz died down there, probably from boredom."

It was obvious that I would have to exercise the diplomatic abilities of Henry Kissinger if I was going to convince my better half that she should trade her TV for an RV. "We are becoming couch potatoes, sitting here in front of the tube all the time. In Baja, we can read good books, walk along the beaches at sunset and have time to really talk to one another. It would be great for our marriage, sort of like a second honeymoon."

"Are you saying that there is something wrong with our marriage?" she asked, acidly.

OOPS! I'd just made the Queen Mother of all mistakes! Never, never even hint that there is something wrong with your marriage or you will instantly find yourself in marital quicksand up to your armpits. "Just think, no TV means no world series or college football," I continued as I tried to dance around the land mine of that foolish remark about our marriage.

"But we aren't young and restless any more," she protested. "We are now classed among the bald and beautiful."

"And no NBA playoffs to watch," I pressed for an advantage.

"But, in all the days of our lives, we have never done anything so irrational as to go off to some foreign country for three whole months as the world turns. What would our relatives think?"

"Going someplace without checking to see what our relatives think isn't irrational. We

deserve to do a few things just for ourselves."

"But you'll miss seeing the Super Bowl."

"Who cares about the Super Bowl this year," I replied. "It's probably going to be either the Jets or the Cardinals who win this year and I hate both of them."

"We don't speak a word of Spanish."

"Most of the people in Baja speak English; and we wouldn't have to watch while every celebrity from Andy Williams to Rin Tin Tin drags their kids in front of the camera for a Christmas Special."

"What about all our children? What will they do if we are off down in this Baja place and not at home during Christmas so they can come to visit?"

"We'll send them a postcard," I answered with the greatest confidence, knowing that when she mentioned the kids, she was firing her last shot of opposition.

We realized that one cannot simply go cold turkey and walk away from a 40 year TV addiction like ours, so we began a withdrawal process. First, I cancelled our subscription to Cablevision and then I brought the little 9 inch black and white TV, which had once been used to watch the Jack Paar show in our bedroom, down from the attic and set it atop our mute 45 inch super screen. When I turned on the tiny set, it hummed a little, made a couple funny noises and belched out a cloud of smoke and dead spiders before flickering to life. By pulling out the rabbit ears and adjusting them to just the right angle, I think that we could actually hear Uncle Milty's voice behind Vanna as she turned the letters.

We found ourselves watching the little TV less and less as we packed, unpacked and changed our minds about what we should take with us to Baja. I had to put my foot down when she wanted to bring along her collection of TV Guides for the past 25 years, but did relent enough to allow her to bring the remote control so she could put it under her pillow as a sort of Linus Blanket to give her a feeling of security as she went to sleep.

We turned off the water, stopped delivery of the newspaper, had our mail sent to one of the kids to hold for us and gave a key to the neighbors so they could keep an eye on the house. It was time to go.

"Bienvenidos," shouted the guard as we crossed the border in the highest of spirits. It was the beginning of an adventure; an escape from dreary days, snow shovels and studded tires. We were bound for the land of sunny beaches and warm nights, of good food and low prices; also where there were no ringing phones and no TV.

NO TV! The full impact of this fact finally came upon us. With every mile that we traveled southward, we could feel the TV signals fading in the air around us; fading away to nothingness. It was almost as if our very lives were also fading away. We had failed to complete the withdrawal process from the tube; we simply had to have one more TV fix if we hoped to survive until sunset.

"COLOR TV! COLOR TV! COLOR TV!" flashed the neon sign of a motel as we entered Ensenada. Almost as if our rig had a mind of its own, tires squealed and it whipped into the parking lot. I grabbed a key from the desk and we sprinted to our room. Without even hitting the bathroom; we switched on the set, flopped down on the bed and waited for the life-giving transfusion of TV. First came the sound, then faint images materialized on the screen. It was a re-run of the GONG SHOW with a guy dressed in a Santa Claus suit, playing Jingle Bells on his armpit. Like two inmates strapped to tables in the shock ward of a hospital for the criminally insane, we were rudely jolted back to reality.

We crawled from the bed, switched off the TV set and staggered back to our rig.

Perspiration rolled down our faces as we started the engine and pulled from the parking lot. No longer did the tires hum the theme from Gilligan's Island as they rolled along the highway. Now the slap, slap, slap of the expansion joints carried the sounds of La Cucaracha, people smiled and waved, and the air was as fresh as a frosty Margarita. We were finally free of that TV monkey on our backs.

Three months later when we crossed the border on our way home; we were lean, tanned and speaking Spanish like a tourist. We had boxes of sea shells, rolls of exposed film and hundreds of stories to tell our friends. Green buds were poking their heads from winter-ravaged soil, robins were gathering twigs for their nests and a fresh, clean smell wafted through the air. There was something else in the air that I couldn't quite identify. An invisible force seemed to be tugging at us, dragging us northward.

"Wonder if Victor and Nikki ever got a divorce?" asked the love of my life.

"Was that the couple that we met in Cabo Pulmo who were always yelling at one another over who had to clean the fish or were they the ones who got into a fight because she was laughing while she pulled the stickers out of his backside after he got drunk and fell into a cactus?"

"You know who Victor and Nikki are, they are the ones who have the little girl named Victoria."

"You mean that strange family in the Winnebago at Cabo San Lucas. I thought that their kid was a boy named Chuckie or Bucky or something like that," I replied.

"Don't be silly, those people had a dog named Lucky. Victor and Nikki were going to get a divorce so he started sleeping with Ashley and got her pregnant. Victor didn't know that Ashley was pregnant and he left her when he found out that Nikki was dying, but then she got well again and in the meantime, Ashley had an abortion, went crazy and fell in love with her psychiatrist."

A cold realization finally hit me. That TV monkey which had been on our backs all those years was still there, lurking in the ozone, just waiting to leap on us again as soon as we returned. TV isn't really an addiction; all those electronic signals flowing through the air do something to the mind.

See how the basic storyline of TV addiction is carried all the way through the story to the very end. It is used much like a clothes line with the various conflicts and situations which support the humor are hung onto it from time to time. There are actually three different conflicts going on in the story, each of which could stand alone as a shorter story. Each of these internal stories has its own introduction, main body and end.

The first story concerns the conflict between the two people about giving up television for three months. The humor in that story is based entirely on that conflict. The story can be milked for just so long and comes to a natural end when the conflict ceases. At this point, it is time to begin the second story.

The second story is based on the conflict between the people and their addiction, which opens up a whole new field on which to play with humor. The middle story is always a good place for the writer to explore a silly sort of humor and what could be sillier than a man in a Santa Claus suit, playing Jingle Bells on his armpit.

The introduction to the final story gives the reader a chance to catch his breath before plunging back into that last burst of humor. It also ties the reader back to the original thought of the storyline about television addiction while allowing the story to come to a graceful and logical end.

CHAPTER 4

WHICH CAME FIRST, THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG

When you decide to write something humorous, which part do you have to come up with first, the story line or the punchline. Actually, it makes no difference. The writer can have the world's dullest and most mundane story to start with, but by seasoning it with the proper bits and pieces of humor, it can be turned into something totally different for the reader. It is sort of like eating grits. Grits, for those of you who have never spent any time south of the Mason-Dixon line, is the world's dullest food. It is made by boiling mature corn, from which every part of the kernel which contained the slightest amount of flavor was removed, and what's left is called grits. Not only is it a dumb food but it also has a stupid name. One would think that anything which is spelled in the plural form would require a plural verb, but not grits. There is only one grits and believe me, one grits is plenty for anyone. The only way to make grits even slightly palatable is by adding something to it. Since grits has absolutely no taste, it will take on the flavor of whatever you put on it.

I once received an assignment from the editor of a woman's magazine to write an article about the cheap carpet which is usually installed in most of today's tract homes and the fact that it was so difficult for the owner to replace it with something better once they have moved in. It was to be a sidebar or companion article to one dealing with what one should look for when shopping for a new tract home. Not only was the article to be about something exceedingly dull, but it had to be written from the viewpoint of a woman. That assignment rated right along with another one which I received several months before from this same editor. This time she wanted me to write an article about chili peppers. At least chilies are used in southwestern cooking which gave me a basis from which to work. I wrote a straightforward article on the history and commercial use of the chili, included a few recipes and it was done. She was evidently happy with what I did with the chili article and was hoping that I could do the same with ugly carpet. I knew that if I turned this assignment down, I'd never get another one from her, so I took the bull by the tail and stared the situation straight in the face. With no recipes for strange or spicy food to hold the reader's attention, making it humorous would be the only way to get anyone to read it.

THE UGLY GREEN CARPET

By: Jim Foreman

"That ugly green carpet has to go," I said emphatically to my husband the moment we stepped through the door. While the predominate color of the carpet was somewhere between the olive drab of his old army fatigues and forest green, random strands of blue, gold and rust were also scattered about in the shag. It was the sort of color which would clash with just about anything which could ever be placed in the room. Later, I read in a magazine that particular color combination was used by builders because it made empty rooms appear larger.

We had decided that with the arrival of our first child, it was time for us to leave the apartment life and buy our own home. We had selected a three bedroom ranch style in a newly-developed neighborhood where the only differences between the cookie-cutter houses was the number on the mailbox and the color that they painted the shutters. In their efforts to keep the cost of the houses to an absolute minimum, the builders had opted for the lowest cost materials that they could find. This included the cheap shag carpet with its own thin pad attached, commonly known as "builder's special", which sold for about two dollars a yard.

"I suppose so," my husband replied, "but that will have to wait for a while because the down payment, closing and moving costs will clean us out."

"How long do you think that it will be before we can buy new carpet?" I asked him.

"I don't know, but from the looks of its quality, it will either wear out or get so dirty that we will have to replace before very long," he replied.

The escrow was paid, the papers signed and we reluctantly moved our furniture onto the ugly carpet, thinking that it would be only a matter of time before it would be replaced. Little did we realize that the carpet would have the tenacity of a third-world despot and would resist our every effort to depose it.

During the first year that we were in the house; furniture was slid across it, feet trampled it and even those little wheels on our daughter's walker pummeled it, but those twisted strands of nylon took the abuse without showing the slightest signs of wear. That ugly green carpet didn't look a bit worse after the first year, but neither did it look any better. It was still just as ugly as the day when we first saw it.

"We'll buy new carpet when spring comes," predicted my husband but the same day that we were to look at carpet samples, the doctor told me that our second child was on the way. So much for new carpet that year.

Not only did the carpet refuse to show even the slightest signs of wear, but it had the uncanny ability to assimilate and digest anything and everything which was dripped, dropped or dumped onto it. Over the next several years, it absorbed the contents of leaky diapers without showing the slightest stain. It soaked up dozens of bottles of that sticky purple syrup which doctors prescribe for children but which they spit out when you try to force it down them. There is no way of estimating how many bottles of formula leaked out and were slurped up by that carpet.

Finally there came the day when I was sure that we had beaten that ugly carpet. The washing machine began to make a funny, clunking noise and urped up about ten gallons of soapy, bleach-laden water which soaked into the carpet.

"I think that I've finally killed that ugly carpet," I shouted with glee the moment that my

husband arrived home that night. We celebrated its demise by dancing on the sodden mess.

"Not only did you bring that ugly green monster to its knees but since it's water damage, the insurance company will have to pay to have it replaced," he replied.

Both the insurance adjuster and the washer repairman came three days later. The insurance man couldn't find the slightest indication that the carpet had ever been soaked while the repairman could only shake his head as he peered into the innards of the washer. We had suffered defeat once again, because instead of getting new carpet, we bought a new washing machine.

As our two children grew older, they discovered new ways to test the digestive abilities of the carpet. They found that it would soak up ketchup, chocolate milk, grape jelly, peanut butter, orange juice, strained peas, applesauce and even melted crayons. Its appetite seemed endless. Our children graduated from rug rats to yard apes but the ugly green carpet didn't change the slightest; it just lived on and on.

"You haven't been feeling well lately," said my husband. "My bonus just came through and new carpet might make you feel better."

"Oh, boy!" the carpet salesman said the moment that he stepped into the room.

"Oh, boy, what?" I asked with cold fear rising in my heart.

"That's the kind of carpet which sort of vulcanizes itself to the floor after it has been down for a year or so. It will cost an arm and a leg just to get it up so we can install the new carpet," he replied. "I'll have to call you with an estimate after I get a price from my installer."

When my husband came home from work that night, I told him, "I have some good news and some bad news. It will cost more to remove the old carpet than it will to install the new one. Also, the doctor called today and said that the frog died."

"So what's the good news?" he asked.

"I suppose that the only good news is that we're having a tuna casserole tonight."

The lifestyle and eating habits of the carpet changed to accommodate our growing children. It withstood the onslaught of slumber parties where it digested seventeen different brands of soda and dozens of half eaten slices of pizza. The tag-team efforts of a pair of girls with their lipstick, fingernail polish and herbal shampoo couldn't faze it.

It proved to be not only girl-proof but just as easily took on the best efforts of our son who became world-renown for accidentally kicking things over on the floor. It slurped up his science project of a gallon of tadpole eggs as well as the entire contents of a "Young Edison" chemistry set, which was only one element short of everything needed to produce nerve gas or atomic fusion. Model airplane glue and tiny chips of balsa wood were no more of a challenge to the carpet than was an entire can of 3 in 1 oil the time that he brought his bicycle into the living room to oil the chain.

The only instance when we really felt that we had finally annihilated the carpet was the time that the neighbor was drying moose jerky on a rack in his back yard and our dog, Lucky, crawled under the fence and ate about ten pounds of it. It made him so ill that he came into the house and threw it up in a corner behind a chair. This happened on the morning when we were leaving on vacation and we were so sure that there would be no way that the carpet would survive that we just left it. When we returned two weeks later, there wasn't the slightest indication that anything had ever happened in that corner.

That ugly green carpet had always clashed with anything which was placed near it, but when our eldest daughter came into the living room wearing her lime green prom dress, the cacophony of colors would have drowned out Sousa playing the 1812 Overture.

"We're shopping for new carpet tomorrow," said my husband.

"Not on your life," I replied. "Every time that we've tried that before, I came up pregnant."

I'll have to admit that while our eldest daughter's pink luggage didn't look too bad sitting on the carpet while she waited for her ride to the university, the old army footlocker looked a lot better the following year when our son set out for the halls of higher learning. We hadn't gotten rid of the ugly carpet, but at least we had gained a certain amount of peace and quiet. We only thought that we had made progress in the noise department until our youngest began to push hard rock through a pair of stereo speakers the size of refrigerators. When she finally finished high school and left for college, I had to rent a U-Haul trailer so she could take her stereo speakers with her. Two weeks later, they were back because the college officials said that they drowned out the band while it practiced on the football field.

Years came and years passed. There were weddings and wars. There were presidential elections and grandchildren. New cars became old cars and were traded in, but that ugly green carpet lived on and on. Like a person who learns to live with a wart on his nose, we had learned to live with the ugly green carpet which still looked just the same as it had the day that we first set foot on it. We came, we saw, but it had conquered.

Once supple backs now creaked in protest when bent and it took my husband two days to mow the lawn. In the spare bedrooms, beds were seldom slept in and the closets contained nothing but clothing which had long since gone out of style. Some people become content in their golden years, but we just became restless. A new motorhome took up residence in our driveway and brochures for retirement communities with their sparkling swimming pools and rolling golf courses began to appear in our mail box.

A real estate sign sprouted from the front lawn like one of the dandelions with which my husband had waged a never-ending battle. One fine morning, we stood aside while an agent entered the house with a pair of prospective buyers.

"That ugly green carpet will have to go," the sweet young thing said emphatically to her equally young husband the moment that they stepped through the door.

"I suppose so," the husband replied, "but that will have to wait for a while because the down payment, closing and moving costs will clean us out."

"How long do you think that it will be before we can buy new carpet?" she asked him.

"I don't know, but from the looks of its quality, it will either wear out or get so dirty that we will have to replace before very long," he replied.

I cast a knowing smile at my husband.

This story proves that if one adds enough spice, even grits can be made to taste better.

So what do you do if you have a dynamite idea for a punchline and want to write a story around it. If this is the case, then you are in luck because the humor is always a lot harder to come up with than the basic storyline. All that one has to do is to write the punchline and work backwards into the story to support it.

So, it makes no difference whether the chicken or the egg came to you first, they are so common to one another that the humor writer can work the story from either end.

Oh, by the way, the editor liked the ugly carpet story so much that she asked for something else funny. I don't remember what I wrote but she never bought it. I suppose that I wasn't properly inspired the second time around.

CHAPTER 5

STRUCTURE, PACE AND TIMING

The title of this chapter is probably enough to make some of you start digging through the trash in search of a copy of *Modern Chiropractic*, *Mechanics Illustrated* or most anything else to read. I'll have to admit that these particular subjects might not be the most thrilling ones in the world, but they are the basis upon which all humor is written. Fail to adhere to any one of these three parameters and your whole story will probably go down the tubes.

Writing humor, in many ways, is very much like writing poetry. All poetry is set to a certain meter which contains a given number of beats or accents per line, a fixed number of lines for each stanza and an inflexible pattern of rhyme. I think that someone invented prose for people who are unable to fit what they want to say into the accepted poetic pattern.

I'm sure that at one time or another, all of you have heard someone tell a joke which went over very well while another person might fall flat when trying to tell the same story. If you stop to analyze the difference in the style of these two story tellers for a few minutes, you will realize why one was a winner while the other flopped. The winner kept your attention while his story flowed along toward the punchline. There were no hidden bumps or potholes to bounce your mind off course and the end seemed to come at just the right time. This person used structure, pace and timing to keep you with him all the way to the end.

I was teaching a course in creative writing a few years ago and one of my students handed in a short story which began:

"Tom Drayson was trudging along what he thought was a totally deserted beach when he saw her sitting on a moss covered rock, drawing lazy little circles in the sand with her big toe. She wore a simple cotton blouse pulled tight across ample breasts and tied in a knot just above a pair of faded jeans which had been cut off so short that the ends of the pockets hung below the tattered bottoms, exposing tanned legs which seemed to go on for a country mile. The setting sun on her hair reflected with the sheen of polished copper. When she noticed that Tom was watching her, she turned her back and walked quickly toward a weathered beach cottage which clung to a barren piece of soil just above the line of trash marking the high tide line...."

So who or what is this story about. Is it about a guy named Tom, some nameless woman with great legs or beach cottages? That aspiring writer was like the preacher who I mentioned at the beginning of this book; he was so busy driving literary nails into that first board that he never realized that he hadn't provided something to nail it to. No matter what sort of story a person is writing, the main subject must be introduced before anything can begin to happen to him. This is especially true when writing humor because if you spend too much time with the introduction, you will lose both the pace and timing necessary to make humor work.

Structure can be broken down as follows: Introduce the main character, chase him up a tree, then throw rocks at him. Once you have him up the tree and occupied with dodging rocks, you can proceed in any direction that you wish. He can either climb back down and beat hell out of you or else you can chop the tree down with him in it. Writing humor follows the same pattern, introduce the subject, set it up and fire the punchline.

Some people might argue that structure and pace are basically the same, but that is not true. Granted, structure and pace are dependent on one another but they are two separate elements of writing humor. Structure is the building in which the humor is housed and pace is the speed at which you walk through it. Each particular situation dictates a pace at which a person is most comfortable. Stray away from this pace or change the pace without a very good reason and you will often kill whatever humor you are trying to create. Take the basic limerick for instance. Each line has four accents and four pauses. Change the pace or tempo of any one line and the whole effect will be lost. Trying to use the wrong pace for the situation is like trying to waltz to polka music, you always have the wrong foot on the ground and step on your partner's toes.

The final and most important part of humor is timing. Knowing the exact time to throw the punchline is much the same as a salesman knowing when to close on a sale. There is usually a very small window of opportunity for both the joke and the sale to be successful. There is an old saying among salesmen that tens of thousands of sales have been killed with the jawbone of an ass. The same holds true when it comes to writing humor. Throw the punchline too soon and much of its impact will be lost. Wait too long and the reader will have already figured out the joke and lost the anticipation.

So how does one go about finding that exact moment to spring the punchline? Taped above my desk is a limerick which serves not only as a guide for timing, but for structure and pace as well. It isn't really all that funny, but I often turn to it when I get bogged down. Simply refreshing my mind by reading this little poem will usually show me where I have lost the structure, pace or timing needed to make something work.

*There was once was an English twit,
Who couldn't tell a joke for shit.
Tho many times he'd try,
His jokes would always die.
Timing could've made them a hit.*

Using this as a guide for structure works just like the rule of thumb used by architects for establishing ideal room dimensions. The ideal room is six units long, four units wide and three units high. The most readable structure for humor is based on six units for the introduction, four units for the situation and three for the punchline. As to pace, there is a beat on every other syllable which keeps things rolling until you want it to stop with a hard ending. Finally, the punchline is only three units long and follows the last part of the situation which has a soft ending.

"WOOPS! What's all this stuff about hard and soft endings that you just mentioned?" you ask.

Ending a sentence with a word with a hard sound tends to cut the thought process off at that point. These are words which end with a consonant which has a hard, explosive sound with closed tongue or lips. The first two lines of the little limerick end with hard words. They should be used only at the end of a paragraph or where one desires to signal a closed or hard ending and a break in the train of thought.

Using words with a soft, vowel sounding end will carry the mind of the reader smoothly into the punchline as illustrated in the third and fourth lines of the limerick. All stanzas of songs end with soft words

as it is almost impossible to sing a word which has a hard end. Soft words tend to carry the mind of the reader on into the next sentence or to the punchline. Often it will be necessary for one to substitute a different word which has either a hard or soft sound to end the sentence with the desired effect.

All of this talk about structure, pace and timing might make humor writing appear to be rather mechanical and it would seem that just about anyone could write humor if he stuck to the proper pattern. Only a fertile mind can produce humor, but following these rules will often make it flow a lot better.

CHAPTER 6

THE MAGIC OF THREE

One of the first things which every engineering student learns is that a triangle is the strongest framework known and that just about every weight supporting structure in the world is comprised of three joined units. A table with three legs will always be stable, no matter how uneven the support surface might be and who ever heard of a camera being mounted atop anything except a tripod.

With this proof of the basic stability of things with three legs, then how come that through the process of natural selection, spiders have eight legs, flies have six, and all animals except for humans, primates and birds have four? There is nothing in the natural world with three legs with the exception of our old cat named Herman; however, he wasn't born that way. Herman wound up with only three legs after climbing under the hood of the neighbor's Buick and tangling with the fan when they cranked the motor. The fact that Herman had two legs in front and only one behind didn't seem to be any sort of a handicap to him as he could whip any three cats or two dogs in the neighborhood, and during his nineteen year lifespan, he must have sired at least 90% of all the kittens born in the town where we lived.

Throughout the ages, just about every historical event of any importance involved groups of three. There were three wise men who went to see Jesus when he was born, Columbus used three ships when he discovered America and it would be unthinkable to have either two or four stooges. Actually, there were four of the Howard boys but Schemp didn't become one of the trio until after another brother dropped out.

Had only two of the stooges tried to work as a team, Moe wouldn't have had two heads to bonk together and had there been four of them, the other three would certainly have ganged up and beat the tar out of him. For those of you who are old enough to remember that there were originally four Marx brothers, you are probably more concerned with prostate problems than being drafted for the army. Anyway, way back in the beginning when the Marx brothers were trying to break into comedy, they found that any three of them could work together very well but when the fourth was tossed into the fray, it became nothing more than confusion. The one with the business head left the stage to manage the other three. Perhaps it is true what my dad used to say about boys, "One will work, two will play, three fight and four scatter."

Just as the magic number of three is what holds all of these conditions together and gives them strength, it will also provide the necessary foundation for the humor writer. Not only does it give a firm basis to play the punchline against, but it also provides a certain cadence needed to make humor work.

When you set out to write something funny, you need to go at it in the same manner as a Sergeant in charge of a firing squad. He doesn't simply light a cigarette for the condemned man, step back and order his men to, "Shoot that sucker!" He gives the prisoner a chance to anticipate what is coming by commanding, "Ready....., Aim....., Fire!"

Your first task in writing is to get the reader's attention. This is usually done with what in writing is

called a "Grabber Line". This is that first and most critical line which you write as it has to literally grab the attention of the reader and make him want to read more. It is like that hackneyed old line, "It was a dark and stormy night." Here are the first lines from the two previous stories which I have used as illustrations. The first is from "The Ugly Green Carpet."

"That ugly green carpet has to go,' I said emphatically to my husband the moment we stepped through the door."

The other first line was taken from "Going Tubeless."

"I'm not sure when the Baja bug chomped down on me, but I suspect that it happened during a commercial in which a pickup truck was leaping from one sand mogul to the next across the Vizcaino Desert while an off-camera announcer raved on about how this rice-rocket had tamed Baja."

I liked the first of the two much better because it is short, sweet and right to the point. The second one had to be somewhat longer in order to establish the proper perspective on the subject. The rule of three doesn't necessarily have to apply to the grabber line if it is strong enough.

If what you are writing is rather lengthy, such as a book, then it is possible to use up to a full paragraph for this purpose, but it is still best if you stick to that first sentence. To illustrate just how important that first line is to the reader; did you ever watch people when they pick up a book for the first time. They will begin reading the first page and will know within seconds whether they want to buy it or not.

Once that you have the reader firmly hooked, you can play against the grabber line to introduce the person or establish the situation on which you plan to hang your humor. Depending on the complexity of the situation and length of the whole piece that you are writing, you can use a whole chapter, a paragraph or simply a line or two to accomplish this purpose.

Once that you have the situation established, then it is time to move to the second part of the triad or troika, giving the reader a reason to anticipate what is going to happen. You want to avoid giving away too much information at this point or else they will get way ahead of you and know what the punchline is going to be. This is known as telegraphing the joke. By the same token, you have to let them in on just a little of the secret to keep the story rolling. As a rule of thumb, this part of the story should be about half the length of the introduction part.

The final part and what we have been working up to all this time is the punchline with the operative word being "line." This is no place for flowers and lace. This is where we yell, "FIRE!" the guns go off and the reader rolls on the floor. The shorter that you can keep the punchline, the better. Trim it down to one word if possible.

Now we come to the second reason for grouping things together in bunches of three. For some reason, having a string of words separated by a comma and a conjunction makes the sentences flow much better and seems to carry the reader on toward the conclusion. In writing humor, not only does it work much better to use groups of three in sentences, but jokes work better when joined in strings of three. Read that last sentence again because it is a perfect illustration how a string of three carries the reader along.

Here are some more excerpts from "Going Tubeless" and "The Ugly Green Carpet" in which you will be able to see how the magic of three was used to carry the thought toward the end. The first is from

"Going Tubeless":

"During the next six minutes, while good old JR Ewing swindled a dozen of his best friends, went to bed with five different women and had Sue Ellen committed to the Betty Ford Center, I plotted how to break the news to the little woman who had promised to love, honor and adjust my vertical hold that I also wanted to tame Baja."

You will notice that I used two strings of three in this one paragraph. Read the paragraph, leaving out just one of the words in each group and see how stilted and awkward it sounds.

In this next illustration, instead of a string of three words which would not have been able to carry the thought properly, I used a string of three sentences. In order to keep the cadence going through the three sentences, I added alliteration in the first sentence to punch up the flow. Alliteration in a group of three words is another bit of magic which makes humor work better. If you can find a place where it works naturally, then use it.

"Not only did the carpet refuse to show even the slightest signs of wear, but it had the uncanny ability to assimilate and digest anything and everything which was dripped, dropped or dumped onto it. Over the next several years it absorbed the contents of leaky diapers without showing the slightest stain. It soaked up dozens of bottles of that sticky purple syrup which doctors prescribe for children but which they spit out when you tried to force it down them. There is no way of estimating how many bottles of milk leaked out and were slurped up by that carpet."

In this final illustration, I not only used strings of three words and sentences, but joined together a series of three paragraphs to carry the idea along.

"The lifestyle and eating habits of the carpet changed to accommodate our growing children. It withstood the onslaught of slumber parties where it digested seventeen different brands of soda and dozens of half eaten slices of pizza. The tag-team efforts of a pair of girls with their lipstick, fingernail polish and herbal shampoo couldn't faze it.

It proved not only to be girl-proof but just as easily took on the best efforts of our son who became world-renown for accidentally kicking things over onto the carpet. It lapped up his science project of a gallon of tadpole eggs as well as the entire contents of a Young Edison chemistry set, which was only one element short of everything needed to produce nerve gas or atomic fusion. Model airplane glue and tiny chips of balsa wood proved to be no more of a challenge to the carpet than did an entire can of 3 in 1 oil the time that he brought his bicycle into the living room to oil the chain.

The only instance when we really felt that we had finally killed the carpet was the time that the neighbor was drying moose jerky on a rack in his back yard and our dog, Lucky, crawled under the fence and ate ten pounds of it. It made him so ill that he came into the house and threw it up in a corner behind a chair. This happened on the morning when we were leaving on vacation. We were so sure that there would be no way that the carpet would survive something like that, so we just left it. When we returned two weeks later, there wasn't the slightest indication that anything had ever happened in that corner."

The other story which I'd like to use illustrates the magic of the number three and the power of a

short punchline. Notice how everything that he says is a string of three.

This is a story about the Texan who decided that after forty-five years, he would return to England to visit where he was stationed during World War Two. He was dressed in his biggest hat, fanciest cowboy boots and most elaborate western shirt as he rode the train from London. He was seated directly across from two English gentlemen, one of whom was rather elderly and hard of hearing while the other was around middle age. The Texan was talking to them.

"Yeah, I was over here durin' the big war. Flew B-24s out of Dunstable; bombed hell out of them Krauts."

"What'd 'e say?" asked the hard of hearing gentleman, cupping his hand behind his ear.

"E knows Dunstable," answered the younger man.

"Yeah, I really know Dunstable. There was a pub there, called The Duck and The Crow. We'd all go there after every mission and get knee-walkin', toilet huggin' drunk."

"What'd 'e say?" asked the elder gentleman.

"E knows The Duck and The Crow."

"Boy, do I ever remember The Duck and The Crow," continued the Texan. "There was this barmaid there; we called her Willing Wanda. She'd drop her knickers for any guy with a pair of wings on his chest."

"What'd 'e Say?" asked the man.

"E knows mother."

CHAPTER 7

WRITING HUMOR FOR THE GENERAL MARKET

The humor writer is very fortunate in the fact that there are almost no limitations to the subject matter which the editor of a general market publication will consider in the way of humor. The readership of these magazines is usually so widely varied that there will always be some group of people to whom any subject will appeal. But since these publications are usually family oriented, one should stay squeaky-clean when it comes to the use of obscenity, profanity and vulgarity. These three words are not synonymous by any means but they are all taboo in most general interest publications. Even though references to sex are becoming rather common these days, one would be much better off to steer clear of it in these articles.

It would probably not be fruitful to try to sell something which used farmers as the butt of the story to a farm magazine. But by the same token, such a story would probably find easy acceptance in one of the many urban publications where most of their readers already think that farmers are a little on the dense side. If it is a really good story, you could probably turn it around to make the farmer the hero instead of the one who takes the verbal pratfalls. In some special cases, it might be possible to make a joke out of the less than urbane lifestyle of the farmer as long you let him retain his dignity and superiority.

To illustrate how this can be done, here is a story about a salesman who became lost while was driving through the country. As he drove along a country road, he saw a farmer leaning against a fence and decided to stop and ask him for directions. As he approached the farmer, he noticed two boys in the field behind the fence. The larger boy had a rope around the neck of a huge hog and the smaller boy was carrying a basket. The hog would waddle along, sniff the ground and root something up with its snout.

The larger boy would tug on the rope and pull the hog back while the smaller boy grabbed what the hog had turned up and put it into the basket. The salesman watched while this happened two or three times and finally asked the farmer, "What on earth are those boys doing?"

"Diggin' taters," replied the farmer.

"Doesn't it take a lot of time to do it that way?" asked the salesman.

"What's time to a hog?" replied the farmer.

While some people might say that this story is putdown to both farmers and salesmen by playing on their individual lifestyles, it still allows them to retain their dignity. The story would lose all meaning if either was left as a nebulous character because everyone associates a laidback lifestyle with farmers and being lost with salesmen. I've sold this same story a number of times, including both farming and marketing magazines, and to my knowledge it has never provoked a hostile letter. You can rest assured that if someone sends the editor a nasty letter about something which you have written, he will see to it that you get a copy. Worse still, he might even put it in the "Letters to the Editor" column of the next issue of the magazine. In the event that an editor should decide to publish a critical letter about something which you have written, it is much better to simply ignore it and not respond through the magazine as that will probably accomplish nothing except shake more nuts out of the trees.

When writing general interest humor, it is best if you can stay completely away from mentioning any particular category of people unless it is absolutely essential to the outcome of the story. It seems that we live in a society where everyone is just waiting for a chance to claim that they have been libeled and sue someone. In addition to the litigious element, there is another cluster of nuts who love to pick apart everything they read so they can object to some part of it. Change that story about the farmer and salesman around to a black man and an Indian and no editor in his right mind would touch it for fear of the flood of mail and lawsuits from both races.

One thing which always impressed me about Indians is that they never seem to get lost, or at least they never admit it. There is the story about the cowboy who was riding across the range when he came upon an Indian standing atop a small hill, shading his eyes and looking off into the distance.

"What's the matter, Chief? Are you lost?" asked the cowboy.

"Me not lost," replied the Indian. "Teepee lost!"

Come to think of it, while Indians certainly have a sense of humor, they aren't a very funny race of people. A cartoonist and I came up with a great idea for a cartoon about Indians. It was a cartoon depicting a doctor looking into an Indian Chief's mouth and telling him, "Say Ugh." It was sold to one of the rather high-scale magazine around in those days and republished as one of their best cartoons of the year.

We thought that it was such a great idea that we decided to use it as the basis for a whole book of cartoons about Indians. I began to research the subject for more ideas but the deeper that I dug, the more convinced I became that Indians aren't basically a funny race of people. Naturally, we could have done a bunch of degrading ethnic cartoons using Indians as the butt of the jokes, but since that was not our intention, we scrapped the whole idea.

In writing for the general markets, one should avoid using any form of inside humor. By this, I mean that there should be no jokes which would be understood only by a particular group of readers. No matter how funny a golfing story might be to golfers, unless it could be appreciated by everyone else, best file that story away for use in an article which you plan to sell to a specific publication, such as *Golfing Digest*. Many times, I will be writing a general interest article and come up with an idea which will be the basis for a special interest story. By the same token, it is possible to write a general interest piece and find that it has appeal to some special interest group.

I once wrote a story called, "Clyde, The Oil-Sniffing Dog" for one of the in-flight airline magazines. It was about this character from back in the oil-boom days of the Panhandle of Texas who claimed that he had a dog which could sniff the ground and tell if there was oil under it. For a fee, which increased rapidly from a few dollars to several hundred for a sniff job, this man would rent out Clyde's magic nose to sniff a prospective well site so the wildcatters would know whether the well was going to be a dry hole or a gusher. Clyde would sniff around for a bit and if there was oil under the ground, he would begin to bark and run in circles. When he located the best spot to drill, he set down and begin to howl.

The man who owned Clyde soon became far wealthier than did most of the wildcatters who had paid the high fees for Clyde's services, especially when many of the wells failed to produce oil according to Clyde's predictions. Before long, some of the drillers who had paid for a sniff job began to question whether Clyde really knew what he was barking about.

One day one of the wildcatters went by to hire Clyde to do a sniff job for him, only to find that the owner had left town, leaving the old dog asleep under the porch. The man decided that since Clyde's owner was no longer around, he would take the dog to the location to see if he would sniff for him. When they arrived, Clyde sniffed around for a few minutes then headed for a shady spot to go to sleep. The man was about to give up when he happened to take off his hat to wipe perspiration from his brow.

Clyde immediately launched into his act, sniffing the ground and running in circles. When the man replaced his hat, Clyde sat down and began to howl. The man tried the hat trick several more times and Clyde responded the same each time, divulging the fact that they had all been swindled by a trained dog which couldn't tell the difference between crude oil from cow manure.

About a month after the article was published, I received a letter which had been written to me in care of the editor of the airline magazine. It was from the editor of a magazine published by the Independent Oil Producers Association. He stated that he had read my article while riding on the airline and wanted to buy the right to reprint the story in his magazine. Since I had sold only first publication rights to the airline magazine, I was able to sell the story to him. As it turned out, he paid me considerably more for reprinting the story than I had received for it the first time.

One of the best ways to come up with ideas for articles is from reading what others have written and sold. I'm not suggesting that you steal the article and rewrite it under your name, but it is not unusual for me to get an idea of a situation which would have improved the story that I'm reading. I jot it down in my notes for future reference. From time to time, I will go through those notes to see if any of the twigs might bear fruit. Often, those little bits of humor will turn into short pieces for markets like Readers Digest, Esquire and other magazines which use quips or single paragraph articles. Those notes are also a gold mine when I begin to put together ideas for cartoon gags, but that is covered in a separate chapter.

CHAPTER 8

WRITING HUMOR FOR THE SPECIAL MARKETS

Writing technical humor for the special interest market is almost the same as writing on assignment where the editor gives you exact instructions concerning what he would like to see in an article. At times, they will even go so far as to tell you how many words they would like to see. Most of the special interest magazines won't consider anything concerning their field which is not written in a language specifically for their field and audience. It is usually counterproductive for a writer who is not well versed in the particular field to attempt to write inside humor for most of these special interest magazines. It would be very difficult to write an acceptable article based on research in the library because most special interests have their own language which can't be found in an encyclopedia. The editors are so familiar with the subject that they can instantly spot someone who is trying to fake their way through a story. This is especially true when it comes to the various sports. It is far better for one to try to sell strictly general interest humor to their magazines unless he is actively involved in the subject.

For the writer who happens to be very familiar with some particular sport or area of knowledge, it's usually fairly easy to put the proper spin or slant on a general interest story to make it acceptable or suitable for a special interest market. The story can involve a situation which has nothing to do with that particular special interest but one which actively involves people in that field. Remember that it is always possible to involve just about anyone in some situation where it might be impossible to involve a situation in some particular activity. By this statement, I mean that it is possible to involve a golfer in an auto accident but it is difficult to isolate auto accidents which would involve only golfers.

A number of years ago, I wrote a story especially for a magazine which dealt with trailer boats. It was a good story with a situation which I felt had more potential than just that one single publication. In the first story, I had the Wonder Woman and the gorilla running down the street. After I became involved in bicycling, I decided to see if I could use the same basic idea in an article for one of the bicycling magazines. By reducing the emphasis on boats and involving the characters in a bicycling activity, the story took on an entirely new light.

ESCAPE FROM CHICKENDANCE

By: Jim Foreman

"I have to drive up to Middle City tomorrow to pick up my sailboat and bring it home for the winter. Care to go along with me?" I asked Ed Moyer as I peered over the glass partition which separated his desk from mine.

"That's a great idea," he replied. "But I read in the club newsletter that they are having mountain bike races up there this weekend. Let's take our bicycles along, drive up tonight and get a good night's rest. Tomorrow morning, we can kick some butt, load your boat on the trailer, and still have time to get home before dark. Of course, if we do that, we'll have to take Judy along. As much as she loves cycling, she would never stand still for us leaving her at home."

Judy Moyer is the kind of person who can add life to any occasion and for my part, she was always a welcomed addition to any trip. Not only was she a fun person to be around, she also had a face and body which would stop traffic and start fights.

"The only reason that I asked you to come along was the hope that you'd bring Judy," I answered with a laugh. "You know that your wife is always welcome. Can you be ready to leave right after work so we can get there before dark?"

"Well, there is one little problem with leaving that early," Ed replied. "The place where Judy works is having a masquerade party and we already have our costumes for that. Since it is a work thing, she feels duty-bound to show up there for at least an hour. Why don't you get yourself a costume of some sort, go to the party with us and then we can leave directly from there."

Masquerade parties have always left me cold, but I suppose that I could stand one for an hour, especially since no one there knows me from Adam. "What costumes will you and Judy be wearing?" I asked.

"We had originally thought about going as a vampire and a witch, but figured that since it is getting close to Halloween, everyone else would dress that way. I'm going to be a big, hairy gorilla and Judy will be in a Wonder Woman costume," he answered.

"Sounds like type-casting to me," I said. "I'll get something to wear and be by your house by six to load the bicycles."

"You should have called and reserved a costume if you wanted one for tonight," the man at the costume shop told me. "With all the parties this time of year, all that I have left are some Santa Claus outfits and one chicken suit."

"I really have to have some sort of costume for a party, don't you have anything else?" I asked him.

"Well, I got plain rubber masks. I got Frankenstein, Casper the Ghost, Howard the Duck, Marilyn Monroe and Richard Nixon."

The first three masks that he mentioned called for a special suit of some sort to go along with them and I wasn't about to go in drag as Marilyn Monroe, so I settled for the Richard Nixon. I knew that I had a dark blue polyester leisure suit in the back of my closet which ought to go just fine with that mask. Dressed up in that rig, I must admit that I looked more like a Mafia hit man or an aluminum siding salesman than an impeached president.

It is hard to crank much enthusiasm into any company party but this one was even duller than most. Ed's gorilla suit was hot and scratchy on the inside, my mask smelled like an old tire and Judy's Wonder Woman costume left little to wonder about. Ed and I also discovered that it is

impossible to drink anything while wearing either a Richard Nixon or a gorilla mask.

While most of the men at the party were enjoying the wonders of Wonder Woman, Ed was trying to find a way to scratch what itched in a suit which zipped up the back. It didn't take very long before we were looking for way to leave the party gracefully. Dame Fortune must have been smiling on us because during a moment of distraction when Eleanor Roosevelt started giving FDR a hard time for trying to put the move on Wonder Woman, we managed to work our way to a side door and slip away.

When we pulled onto the Interstate, it was still light enough for other drivers to notice that car with three bicycles on top was being driven by Richard Nixon with Wonder Woman and a gorilla as passengers. We were having far more fun with the other drivers than we had at the party until red lights began to flash in our rear window. A state patrol officer, who proved to have absolutely no sense of humor, asked me to blow up a balloon. Since there is no law against driving while looking silly, he let us go after a stern lecture and a warning not to cause any more trouble.

Our source of amusement changed from watching other drivers do double takes when they saw us to laughing at Ed as he attempted to pull off the gorilla suit in the back seat. A few miles further toward Middle City and red lights flashed again. This time it was because someone had called the state police to report that a man in the back seat of a car with three bicycles on top was mooning people. I passed another drunk test but being stopped twice within thirty miles tends to take the edge off a party, so we drove on to Middle City in silence.

We had an early breakfast before going to the marina where my boat was moored. By the time that we had stowed the gear, dropped the mast and had the boat ready to load aboard the trailer, it was almost time for the races to begin. We arrived just in time to pick up our freebie T-Shirts and get on the starting line without the benefit of stretching or warming up.

We went off with the first jam but within a couple miles we were as fried as the bacon and eggs that we had for breakfast. In fact, we were having them again but they didn't taste nearly as good as the first time. The only butts being kicked that day were ours. We finished but this was not one of our shining days in the saddle. Judy, on the other hand, cleaned up pretty good and went to collect her booty which consisted of a case of power bars, two high dollar tires and a pair of Rock Shox.

It seems that this was the day on which everyone who owned a sailboat had decided to take it out of the water for the winter and when we arrived back at the marina, the line waiting for the hoist was half a mile long. The sun was just about to drop behind the horizon when my boat was finally lowered onto the trailer and it was totally dark by the time that we secured the boat, checked the tail lights and pulled out onto the road home. It had been a long day and was destined to be a lot longer as we towed the unwieldy trailer through the darkness at forty miles an hour.

"I see a shortcut which will save about thirty miles and keep us from having to go through a couple big towns," said Judy, who was looking at the map with a flashlight in the back seat.

"That'll save at least an hour," I replied. "Where is it?"

"Take State Road 86 at the next exit for about twenty miles and then Farm Road 1146 back to the Interstate. There is just one little town called Chickendance to go through that way," she said.

"Who ever heard of a town with a stupid name like Chickendance" asked Ed.

"I don't know, but it is right here on the map," replied Judy.

We had been rolling along State Road 86 for about fifteen miles when the headlights suddenly dimmed and the red eye "GEN" winked on.

"Damn, we just lost the alternator," I said as I switch from headlights to park in order to conserve electrical power. "I can see the center stripe with the park lights well enough to drive. Perhaps we can get to a town before the battery dies."

"I see the lights ahead, must be that place called Chickendance," said Judy.

Half a mile down the road, the instrument panel opened its other red eye "ENG" and I pulled to the side of the road. I could hear the coolant boiling in the radiator but at least I knew better than to remove the radiator cap. With the aid of the flashlight, we spotted the problem; the belt which drove both the water pump and alternator had parted company with us.

By allowing the engine to cool for half an hour, we could make about a mile before it would overheat and we would have to stop again. It was well past ten when we finally passed a sign which informed us that we were entering the town of Chickendance with a population of 965. The block-long main street was illuminated by a single sodium vapor light on a pole in front of the Chickendance Hardware. Other buildings along either side of the main street were the Chickendance Realty, Chickendance Insurance, Chickendance Drugs, Chickendance Pool Hall and Chickendance Feed Store. There was even a Chickendance State Bank on the corner. The only place which didn't bear the name of Chickendance was directly across the street from the hardware store. It was a cafe with the unimaginative name of EATS.

"Looks like everything is closed," said Judy as we reached the end of the block. "Wonder if there is a place to stay in this burg."

"There's a Texaco station," said Ed. "At least we can get a fan belt put on in the morning."

"That is if it's open on Sunday," I replied.

"I think that I see a motel," shouted Judy, pointing to a flickering neon sign down a dark side street.

The neon sign in front of the tiny, five unit motel had once read REGAL MOTEL, but with several of the glass tubes having been broken, it now only read RE MOTE. The door of the office was locked but after ringing the bell several times and beating on the door, a gnome of a little man came stumbling from a back room, trying to put on his glasses and zip his trousers at the same time. Even though it was only a few minutes past ten, he must have been in bed for hours. I doubt that very many people came to Chickendance in the middle of the night.

"Whut you want?" he shouted through the locked door.

"Two rooms, if you have them," I answered.

"Whut fur?"

"So we can spend the night," I answered.

"Whut you want to spend the night here fur?"

"Well, we didn't want to spend the night here, but our car is broken, so we have to," I answered in exasperation.

The little man finally unlocked the door and let us into the tiny office. "Two rooms?" he asked, looking us over carefully. "Who's going to be in which room?"

"I'll be one room and they will be in the other," I replied.

"You two married?" asked the little man as he cast a doubtful look his glasses. "I don't allow no foolishness in my place."

"Newlyweds," said Judy, flashing a smile and her rings at him.

Evidently satisfied, he handed me the key to room number one and Ed the key to room two. Probably the first time that either room had been rented in months.

We removed the bicycles from the rack on top of the car and rolled them into our rooms.

Since there was no place to park the trailer in front of the motel, I pulled around the corner onto main street and disconnected it next to the light pole in front of the hardware store. With the trailer parked under a street light and the safety chains locked around the pole, it should be safe for the night.

The following morning, while the man at the Texaco station was replacing the fan belt, we went around to the EATS cafe for breakfast. We were the only people in the place and while our bacon and eggs sizzled on the grill; the man behind the counter, who was wearing a bowling shirt with Ralph stitched above the pocket, gave us a thumbnail history of the town.

"Old man Ephram Chickendance owns everything for miles around here and when the state built highways across his land, he decided to open a hardware store and a garage where the two roads crossed. He had about a dozen kids, all boys. Named every one of them something which ended in "ram". There is Hiram, Bertram, Arfram, Nefram, Doram, Orphram and a whole bunch more that I can't remember. I suppose that he finally ran out of "ram" names because he named his last one Clarence. Soon as each one got old enough to get married, he'd open up another business and put him in charge of it. About twenty years ago, he opened the bank, incorporated the town and appointed himself mayor, tax collector and city judge. I suppose that me and Mom and old man Barnes, who owns the motel, are the only people in town who ain't related to him in one way or another."

As he set our plates on the table, I looked across the street. Parked in front of my trailer was one of those old slab- sided Lincolns made back in the late 1950s. It had been painted black at one time but now the front half was painted white and the rest of it was covered with peace signs and all sorts of spray- painted designs. There were chrome sirens mounted on each front fender, a pair of red gumball lights on the roof and a big yellow star on the door.

"What on earth is that rig parked across the street?" I asked.

Ralph stooped so he could see beneath the curtains on the window and replied, "That's Clarence Chickendance's goofy kid, Crazy Walter. We all figure that he's that way from cousins marrying cousins. He's about three bricks short of a full load, but they let him play like he is the city marshal and hand out parking tickets. He's waiting for who ever owns that trailer with the boat on it to come along so he can give them a ticket for parking on main street."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked. "After all, this is Sunday and there isn't another vehicle on the street except that Lincoln."

"Hiram Chickendance, who runs the hardware store, got mad because truckers kept parking in front of his place to come over here and eat, so he got his daddy to pass a law against parking trailers on main street. It's going to cost someone forty bucks."

"Where did Walter get that car?" I asked. "It looks like something that a bunch of hippies would drive around."

"That's exactly what it is. A whole nest of them hippie people came driving into town one day, doing all sorts of crazy things like handing out flowers, playing guitars and not wearing any shoes. Old man Ephram arrested the whole bunch but since they didn't have any money and he didn't have a jail to throw them into, he just fined them that car and told them to get out of town. Then he gave it to Crazy Walter to drive. Walter fixed it up with all that junk to make it look like a real police car and tried to paint it white. That is far as he got when Hiram found out that he was sneaking spray cans of white paint out of the hardware store and put a stop to it."

"Is Walter dangerous?" I asked.

"Only when he is behind the wheel of that car, and that's most all of the time. He even

sleeps in it. Won't step out of that car except to eat or use the bathroom. Ephram lets him carry a gun but he won't give him any bullets."

Since I wasn't in the mood to let Ephram's goofy grandson give me a forty dollar ticket, we began to hatch a plan to get Crazy Walter to move his hippie Lincoln from in front of the trailer long enough for me to hook it up and escape. One plan after another was discussed and then rejected while we ate breakfast. Finally, we came up with the perfect scam. I paid the Texaco man for replacing the fan belt and returned to the hotel room to set out plan in motion.

The first element of the plan was to get Crazy Walter to move the Lincoln. To do this, it was decided that Judy would dress in her Wonder Woman costume and Ed would don his gorilla suit. Then they would get on their bicycles, ride around the block and come racing past Crazy Walter. We figured that it was a sure bet that he wouldn't get out to chase them on foot but would go after them in the car. By the time that he could get that whale turned around, they could whip around the corner and hide in the motel room. While he was looking for them, I would hook up the trailer and get out of town. Once that things had cooled down, I would return for Ed, Judy and our bicycles. It was a foolproof scheme.

Everything was in readiness. I was in my car, Richard Nixon mask on, motor running and poised for action. Ed and Judy were in costume and ready to ride. While getting into their costumes, Ed decided to add a bit of drama to the plan by having it appear that he was chasing Judy. I was parked where I could see Wonder Woman and the gorilla when they came around the bank at the end of the block. I had the key to the padlock securing the trailer to the light pole in my hand and was ready to dig out the instant that Crazy Walter moved from in front of the trailer.

Wonder Woman came into sight first, pedaling like crazy. Ed, who couldn't get the big, rubber gorilla feet into the toeclips and was having to ride with the pedals upside down, had fallen far behind as he came wobbling after her. The other problem which we hadn't considered was that Crazy Walter might be absorbed in reading a comic book and wouldn't noticed them coming. This turned out to be a blessing of sorts because Judy had to make a couple circles in the street to wait for Ed to catch up. When Judy noticed that Crazy Walter still hadn't seen them, she saved the day by letting out a blood curdling scream just as she passed the window of the Lincoln. Ed was already doing a lot of huffing, puffing and grunting in the gorilla suit, so he didn't have to add any particular sound effects to make him appear real.

Crazy Walter bolted upright in the seat, the motor on the Lincoln bellowed to life, the gumballs rotated and the chrome sirens began to yowl. Walter cut his wheels to the left to turn around to go in pursuit of the scantily clad woman who was being chased by a gorilla. Tires spun, screeched and smoked as the front end of the behemoth began to come about like the Queen Mary leaving the dock.

At the same instant that all of this was taking place, Ralph's mother just happened to be crossing the street, bringing a couple home-made pies to be served at the cafe. She stood transfixed in the middle of the street, with a chocolate creme in one hand and a lemon meringue in the other. As the Lincoln completed its turn and headed directly toward Mom, she launched the pies into the air and dove for the safety of the sidewalk. The pies reached the apogee of their flight and began their plunge back to earth just in time to splat themselves onto the windshield of the charging Lincoln. Unable to see through the pie-covered windshield, Crazy Walter found himself on an instrument flight plan as he careened down the street. He veered to the right, bounded over the curb, wiped out a fireplug and crashed through the front of the pool hall, finally coming to a stop with his bumper resting against the snooker table.

Judy and Ed rounded the corner and darted into their room at the motel. I accelerated past the carnage which Crazy Walter had wrought and quickly backed the car in front of the trailer. Seconds later, I had the padlock removed, dropped hitch onto the ball, spun the knob to secure it and was headed out of town. A couple miles down the road, I found a barn behind which I could hide the trailer.

I took off the Richard Nixon mask and drove slowly back into town to pick up Judy and Ed. When I arrived, it seemed everyone in Chickendance was getting soaked by the geyser shooting from the busted fireplug as they gathered in front of the pool hall to see what was going on. We loaded our bicycles on the car and drove quietly out of Chickendance. As we reached the end of main street, we could still hear the sirens screaming inside the pool hall. Crazy Walter was in the middle of the crowd, waving his arms and telling how he had crashed his police car while trying to save Wonder Woman who was being chased by a gorilla on a bicycle and how Richard Nixon had stolen the trailer that he had been guarding.

As you can see, the whole basis of the story involves being stranded overnight in a small town and then having to formulate an escape from an overzealous marshal and has nothing at all to do with bicycling. However, since it actively involves bicyclists in the situation and uses bicycles as an integral part of the escape, it easily slides over into a special interest story about that sport. I also used some inside bicycling terminology to further tie bicycles with the story. It wouldn't be adequate to simply introduce bicycles at the beginning of the story and then let them drop from sight. It is necessary to keep them involved throughout situation, as well as the escape, in order to make this a story about bicyclists.

CHAPTER 9

WRITING GAGS FOR CARTOONISTS

Writing gags for cartoonists is a whole different bucket of worms than writing humor for publication. First of all, you will have to come up with ideas which will not only appeal to the ultimate cartoon editor, but ones which will also excite the interest of the artist sufficiently for him to invest his time and effort to draw them. After all, it usually takes the cartoonist a lot longer to draw the cartoon than it did for you to think of it and then he has to find a market for it.

There are two ways to go at this rather offbeat part of the business of writing humor. By far the best way is to work directly with a cartoonist in face to face gag sessions in which the two of you will kick around ideas until you come up with something which he feels that he can successfully draw and sell. Unfortunately, few of us live near Laguna Beach, California where the most of today's top selling cartoonists happen to reside. Jot down the names of the artists whose cartoons appear in most of the major publications and you will likely find about half a dozen of them having breakfast together each Saturday morning in a nondescript little restaurant just around the corner off the beach highway. Not only do they use those Saturday morning meetings to exchange ideas and recharge their creative batteries, but it is also the place where they held a raucous wake for the famous Virgil Partch [cartoonist for *Collier's* magazine]after he was killed in an automobile accident.

The most common method of working with cartoonists is by mail, but that is rather impersonal. I've written gags for a couple cartoonists for the past fifteen years but have never met either of them. In fact, I have spoken only once on the phone with one of them and that was when we were trying to chase down some gags which had been lost in the mail. We never found them which is a good reason why one should never mail the only copy that he has of something.

The accepted standard for mail correspondence with a cartoonist is via 3 X 5 file cards. Another standard is the number of gags sent in a batch is always 10. Most likely the reason for this is because that is the maximum number of cards which can be mailed with a single stamp. Ten is also about all the gags which the cartoonist can give consideration to at one time. The form used for gags is simple and straight forward. Your name and address go in the upper left corner and you can include an identifying number for the gag in the upper right corner. The idea for the cartoon is typed in lower case and the caption is all capitals. Nothing else is needed on the card. Naturally, a self-addressed, stamped return envelope is always included if you expect to get them back.

When the cartoonist receives a batch, he will look them over and if any of them look interesting, he will hold those cards and return the rest. He will draw up your ideas, along with others which he might have, and mail them off to magazine cartoon editors where he feels that they might find a home. When the magazine buys a cartoon and sends him a check, he will send you 25% of what he received for the cartoon, along with your original gag card showing the date and name of the magazine which bought it.

There is an almost total separation of church and state when it comes to dealings between

cartoonists and gag writers. The gag writer never, never tells the artist how to draw the cartoon! He should never tell the artist what a certain character in the cartoon should look like unless it is absolutely essential to the gag. Finally, the fastest way to get the artist to send your batch back by the same postman who delivered them is to tell him to draw a man with a silly look on his face or a kid with a dumb smile. If such a look or expression is necessary to carry the punchline, then the artist will know how to draw it without being told.

There are two basic types of cartoons. The most popular with the artist is the caption-less variety in which the entire story is carried by the cartoon. He likes this type of cartoon because it allows him to use his creative talents and not have to depend on the crutch of a punchline to carry the story. Here are a few examples of gags which are self sustaining and need no captions.

Jim Foreman

Lineman up pole looking down at beaver chewing it off at the base.

Jim Foreman

Man in very low sports car, looking at a very big dog standing beside him and rapidly rolling up his window.

The second type of gag is one in which the drawing establishes the situation and the caption or punchline carries the humor. They still have to work together or the whole idea is lost. You have to depend of the talents of the artist to establish the storyline to make the humor work, otherwise one could simply draw stick figures with funny captions. Unfortunately, in some of the magazines which use only bottom of the trash can type cartoons, the captions have to carry the whole load. By trash can cartoons, I mean those which have been out several times and the cartoonist is about ready to toss them in the trash, but decided to send them off to one of those checkout stand rags which pay only three to five bucks for them.

Some people would say that people who write cartoon gags must have a rather warped sense of humor. I suppose that we do, but it's a dirty job and someone has to do it. In fact, it is often the most bizarre ideas which bear the fruit. It usually takes a certain amount of really off-the-wall ideas to get the creative juices flowing enough to let you come up with something really worthwhile. In group gag writing, these sessions where we really get silly are referred to as mental enemas because they get the crap out of your mind so you can begin to think productively.

There are two ways to go at getting ideas for gags. A lot of them come to me as I go through my usual daily activities. If you develop the habit of looking at everything in life as a possible cartoon, almost anything might trigger your funny bone. Since I lack a photographic memory, I always carry a notebook with me and jot down ideas as they pop into my mind. In fact, typing that last sentence just gave me an idea for a gag.

Jim Foreman

Courtroom scene. Man on witness stand and sexy woman at the defense table. Witness is saying,

SURE I REMEMBER HER, I HAVE A PORNOGRAPHIC MEMORY.

Back to what I was saying about collecting ideas as we go through our daily lives. You need to develop a certain cartoon sense which gives you the ability to look at even the most mundane subjects in the light of a cartoon. It can be something as simple as seeing a policeman writing a traffic ticket to a little old lady.

Jim Foreman

Little old lady in car to traffic officer writing ticket.

OFFICER, DO YOU GIVE A SENIOR CITIZEN DISCOUNT?

Everyday jobs can lead the mind of a cartoon thinker down strange pathways. Just think of the possibilities offered in the most commonplace occupations. Then there are those special occupations which lend themselves so easily to cartoons. The ideas for these are endless. Used car salesmen, school teachers, prison wardens and policemen come immediately to mind.

There are also thousands of possibilities in talking animals, especially when endowed with human traits or weaknesses. Everyone knows that animals never talk except in cartoons. It's an easy twist for something which is commonplace with humans to be really funny when applied to animals.

Jim Foreman

Two toads under a bug zapper with dead bug falling toward them.

One toad says to the other,
I THINK THIS IS WHAT THEY CALL MANNA FROM HEAVEN

Or, if you a person with a really sick mind, how about this twist to this gag.

Jim Foreman

Prison warden, priest and prisoner walking into execution chamber. Instead of an electric chair, there is a huge bug zapper.

Second only to talking animals, children can be a limitless source of ideas for cartoons. They are so free and uninhibited that countless ideas will flow from their mouths. They are especially famous for getting well known phrases turned around or for mixing up words.

Jim Foreman

Lady and young girl in car. Sign ahead says, Road closed, barricades ahead. Little girl is saying,

IT MUST BE CLOSED FOR A CIRCUS. THE SIGN SAYS THEY HAVE BEAR CAGES AHEAD.

When you run out of inspired ideas, it is time for you to get down to the real job of writing humor by coming up with good gags from scratch. Writing cartoon gags can be approached from either end, that is from the punchline or from the situation.

Working from the punchline is usually a bit more difficult for most people because they are used to seeing the drawing first and then reading the punchline. One good way to work from the punchline is to pick an old saying or trite expression like, "*Give me your money or I'll...*" I kicked that around for a few minutes and came up with this gag after remembering something which I had seen on the evening news. They were reporting a holdup at a liquor store and in the background was a guy with one of those huge radios on his shoulder.

Jim Foreman

Liquor store. Man with huge radio on his shoulder, to clerk,

GIVE ME YOUR MONEY OR I'LL TURN IT ON.

The alternate path to a gag is from the situation. I'm sure that all of you have seen those contests where there is a cartoon and you write the punchline. Some of those cartoons are rather obvious while others may be nothing more than two people talking. As an example, let's take the idea of a cartoon of a sailing ship in rough water. This offers many possibilities. Let's try a few.

Sailing ship in rough water. Captain at wheel to passenger who is heaving over the rail.

You can start out by writing all sorts of gag lines and then throw out those which aren't funny. An example:

DON'T YOU JUST LOVE TO FEEL THE SPRAY IN YOUR FACE.
THE REAL FUN OF SAILING WILL BEGIN AS SOON AS THE WIND PICKS UP.
IF THIS STORM GETS ANY WORSE, I MAY HAVE TO HEAVE TO.

This is how I'd rate those three punchlines. The first one belongs in the trash. The second might go to a sailing magazine while the last one would probably sell to just about any general interest magazine.

Another way to inspire yourself is to do a bunch of What-If's. What if this was the situation, what if this was happening, what if something was this way. There are also those what-if's for the deep thinkers like, what if a tree fell and there was no one to hear it, would there still be a crash. There are only a few of these deep psychological questions but there must be thousands of what-if's for the humorist. The possibilities are endless.

What if your yogurt spoiled, how could you tell.

What if your knees bent the other way, what would chairs look like.

What if cats weren't ambidextrous, how would they wash the other side of their face.

What if girls wore both patent leather panties and patent leather shoes, what would you see when you looked at their feet.

What if dogs could talk. What would poodles say about their hair cuts. Would other dogs think that they belonged to some strange religious cult?

Start working on your own list of what-if's and pretty soon you will start to come up with some really good cartoon ideas.

One of the best things about gag writing is the fact that you can write something in a minute or two and be finished with it. If you decide that after it has fermented for a few days, it has turned into vinegar instead of fine wine, then you haven't invested or wasted much time on it. Finally, with most of the better markets paying anywhere between two and four hundred dollars for each cartoon that they use, your 25% is pretty good income for the amount of time that is required to come up with most gags.

On the down side, the average gag writer will get a cartoonist to hold and draw only one out of about every ten gags that he sends him. The average cartoonist will sell about half of what he draws up and some of those will finally have been dumped into the \$10.00 market after they made the rounds of the big magazines. Other than the commission check, the only thing that the gag writer gets is bragging rights because his name never appears on the finished cartoon.

One of the main reasons why I occasionally resort to gag writing is that, like everyone else, I simply go dry. When this happens, I get out the three by five cards and write a few gags. It gets my creative juices flowing and that is what humor writing is all about. You never know when a cartoon idea will trigger a story or even a book.

CHAPTER 10

WRITING HUMOR FOR TV AND THE MOVIES

Two things which the freelance humor writer should remember when trying to break into either of these markets is that they are awfully hard nuts to crack and there is no honor among thieves.

For every situation comedy script which makes it onto TV, there are twenty, and perhaps fifty or even a hundred, which never get past one reading by some guy wearing an expensive suit. In fact, one is very lucky if they get that far because many of them are seen and rejected by someone so far down the ladder that they have to look up to see the basement. The odds aren't much better for those which finally work their way to the surface and pilots are actually shot. The streets of Hollywood are littered with reels of both good and bad humor which fell by the wayside.

It takes far more than being able to turn out a few funny lines to make the grade in that town. Even if some network executive gets excited enough about your ideas to call for a pilot to be produced, before your work ever gets before a camera, it will have been written, changed, re-written, laundered and altered until it will bear little resemblance to your original thoughts. In fact, what finally goes before the camera will most likely have been written by some staff writer who has never met you nor seen your original work. They usually give him your basic ideas in memo form and let him do his own creating from that.

If all this isn't enough to make you decide to forget the whole idea and look elsewhere for a market for your talents, consider the fact that an individual writer has absolutely no protection for his work once it sinks into that quagmire. Many a writer has sent a dynamite joke or idea to some producer for consideration, only to see it used in an altered form on another show a few weeks later. No matter how much effort that you might have used in order to copyright and protect the idea, it will be up to you to prove that it was your original idea, and that will be awfully hard to do. Millions of dollars have been spent in vain by people trying to prove their literary rights. You will not only be fighting an uphill battle, but you will be attacking a totally closed society in which the outsider hasn't a ghost of a chance of victory.

There are three basic ways for a person with the proper talent and perseverance to break into this market. One method of protecting your work is to obtain the services of an honest agent. Perhaps using honest and agent in the same sentence constitutes an oxymoron. An oxymoron is a combination of two words which, when used separately, are perfectly logical but when joined, form a contradictory statement. Some famous oxymorons are military intelligence or postal service. Anyway, If you can locate an agent who will represent you, he will protect your rights to what you write. Also, using an agent is often the only route by which you can get your material seen by someone who can get it to the right person.

The problem with most ten-percenter is that if they are good at their trade, they already represent top people and usually aren't inclined to take on an unknown writer. Further, those who are looking for new people to represent are doing so because they are usually less successful or less reputable, or both. Also, most of the thousands of agents around Hollywood represent actors while only a very few look after

the affairs of writers.

The second method of seeing your work on the tube or screen is by getting it published as a book and then letting the publisher sell the movie rights to someone to make it into a movie. Most humor writers find this route equally difficult because what works well on paper usually doesn't transfer easily to the screen. Even if it can be made to work, the changes can become so drastic that little is left of the original work. A good example of this is a book written by a good friend, Andy Anderson. The title of both the book and the movie is *Bat-21*. In the book, which was based on fact, the hero is shot down in enemy occupied territory in Viet Nam and needs help in finding safe escape routes to where he can be picked up. He finally escapes to safety through the efforts of his fellow officers who guide him out of the jungle by having him follow directions which represented golf holes which he had played at various military courses. This was not only logical but the way that it actually happened. When the movie came out, the whole plot had been turned around to where the downed airman was telling them what courses he was going to follow so they would know where he was going. This wasn't even logical when one considers that his main problem was not knowing where the enemy was located so he could avoid them.

There is one ray of hope for the person who is looking for a market for his work on the TV tube and that is the whole new field of movies made for TV. These movies are basically low budget productions made especially for TV and probably never will be seen on the screen. They use little-known actors and every effort is made to keep the production costs to a minimum. In fact, most of them are shot on video tape because this is far more efficient and less costly than film, especially when it comes to editing. These movies are shot in a studio or on a single location, much in the same way as the daily soap operas. As a result, they cost a very small percentage of what one made for the screen does.

When a producer finds an idea for a TV movie, it is sold to either a network or syndicate before any production is ever done. Many times it will be sold to some actor who is willing to put both his money and talent in the starring role into the production. Once that it is sold, screen writers take over and script it to make the story fill the exact number of minutes to fill a certain timeslot, usually two hours. Rather than beginning with a book, they prefer to have a raw manuscript to work from. The producers also like to work with an unpublished manuscript because it has no history, either good or bad. If the book was a bomb, it will be very hard to sell it as a movie. However, if it was very successful as a book, the cost of the movie rights could easily exceed the entire production costs. Right now, there are at least ten made for TV movies being shot for every one made for the screen. A whole new group of agents and producers have come about to promote these movies and most of them are looking for material. They can usually be found in the Los Angeles yellow pages under AGENTS, Television Production.

The final and even more precarious route into Tinseltown is the direct approach by sending out letters and knocking on doors. You have nothing to lose except time by asking for a job on some show's writing staff. First of all, you will find yourself at the back end of some very long lines and should you ever be able to work your way to the front and through the door for an interview, you will probably find yourself in the same position as the man who was sleeping in an upper berth on a train. He had to get up to get out and had to get out to get up. Or, in plain words, you will need experience in order to get a job and you must have had a job as a comedy screen writer in order to have the experience. No matter what route you choose, before you can go to work for anyone, you will have to become a member of the Screen Writers Guild and that in itself is a hard union to crack.

It may carry some weight with the interviewer if you have several published humor articles behind you but even then, he will recognize that while you might have the talent, you will be entering an entirely different world of writing. Writing for this media is far more visual than vocal and much of your training in the basic arts of humor will not be applicable here. Still, if you are exceptionally talented, or just plain

lucky, you might be considered to be raw potential and given a trial shot as a junior writer. After all, every writer out there today had to start someplace and it might just be your lucky day.

CHAPTER 11

WRITING TOPICAL AND POLITICAL HUMOR

There is a wide open and fertile field which the humor writer can plow year after year. With news breaking every day, there is always a fresh supply of situations to excite the imagination. In addition, every two years or so, there are people all the way from politicians running for national office down to local candidates running for offices as mundane as dog catchers who need humorous barbs to fling at their opponents.

Writing humor for politicians to use in speeches involves a strange combination of fact and fiction. It must be true enough to keep the politician from getting sued, shot or defeated at the polls while funny enough to keep the interest of his listeners. There is nothing like a good joke to get the audience on the side of some politician who is about to tell them how great he is and how crooked or inept his opponent might be.

In just about every newspaper, there is usually a weekly sheet devoted to nothing but editorials and columns about items in the news. If your local newspaper uses stringers, this page offers a golden opportunity to the freelance writer who is willing and able to come up with eight to ten column inches of readable print on a regular schedule about the various topics of the day. They pay by the column inch for these articles. I wrote one of these weekly columns for several years and called it, "According to what I read in the papers".

Since the news is seldom about the same thing each week, the writer has little reason to go cold on his subject. The worst problem is the fact that it is awfully hard to come up with something funny about the usual headlines such as drug raids, murders and auto accidents. While the front page has little to offer, there are usually items to be found on inside pages which offer great possibilities.

I was digging through the local paper for ideas for my column when I noticed three totally unconnected stories. One was about the fight which was going on in the state legislature between politicians over who would be getting the biggest share of the budget pork barrel money in the upcoming vote. Another story was about the terrible condition of most of the state highways and the lack of money with which to fix them. The final story concerned a survey which indicated that 34% of the people in the state could not read and write above a fifth grade level.

I began my weekly column with this sentence, *"According to what I read in the papers, it makes me think we are living in Mexico. We both have greedy politicians, terrible roads and a third of the people can't read and write English."* I concluded the column with a stock story about a man who was running against the incumbent for the office of County Commissioner. He was making a speech to a group of farmers and stressing the fact that one of the first things that his opponent had done after taking office was to have the road to his place paved at county expense. One of the people in the audience spoke up, "Then I'd suggest that we keep that guy in office because he already has his road."

There are times when there is absolutely nothing in the papers which would be funny to write

about. When those times come along, or else I need to fill some space, I resort to writing one of my "Uncle George" stories. I actually had an Uncle George who, during his lifetime, provided me with many worthwhile and basically true anecdotes. He has also served as the vehicle for writing many stock stories. A stock story is one which could be about almost anyone but is always a lot funnier if it can be told as if it had happened to a specific person. Any humor writer who doesn't have a library of such stories is cheating himself out of a lot of great material.

I don't know why, but people who would run for an office as silly as County Commissioner have always tickled my funny bone. I don't know if it effects everyone else in this way, but there is just something naturally funny about people running for that particular office. Perhaps it is because that while the office pays little or nothing, there will usually be a dozen or more people running for it. The very fact that there will be no salary paid to holders of this office is probably the reason why few professional politicians ever file to run. Most of the candidates for the county commission are just plain people who see the office as a way to serve their community or else a place from which they can correct a perceived wrong. Then there are the malcontents who are looking for a soapbox to mount and occasionally, someone who is just plain nuts. Being non-politicians, they often provide unsuspected gems of both wisdom and humor. This is one of my favorite stories about a candidate for county commissioner.

A man came up to a farmer, introduced himself and said that he was campaigning for a man by the name of Joe Jones, who was running for county commissioner.

"Is that the same Joe Jones who used to run the drawbridge down on the river?" asked the farmer.

"Why yes," replied the man. "Mr. Jones did such a great job running the drawbridge all those years that we just know that he will make a fine county commissioner."

"Since he's that Joe Jones, then there is no way that I'd vote for him. He killed my prize bull," replied the farmer.

The man was so shocked to hear such a statement that he asked, "How on earth did Mr. Jones kill your prize bull?"

"Well, it happened like this. One day my prize bull became constipated, so I called up the Vet to see what to do. The Vet told me to give the bull a hot, soapy water enema. Well, I got this bucket of hot, soapy water all mixed up and started looking for a funnel but all that I could find was an old Boy Scout bugle. When I got the bugle in place and started pouring in the water, it must have been too hot because the bull busted out of the corral and started running down the road toward the river, going Toot, Toot, Toot. Old Joe Jones heard him a'comin' and thought he was a steam boat, so he raised the drawbridge. My prize bull went right into the river and drowned. Now, anyone who ain't got sense enough to know the difference between a steamboat whistle and a bull with a Boy Scout bugle in his butt doesn't deserve to be a county commissioner."

There is no set amount of money which newspapers will pay for weekly columns such as these, but it usually ranges somewhere between three and five dollars an inch, depending on circulation and the number of people who respond to it. While twenty-five to fifty dollars sounds a bit on the low side for original humor, you have to consider that once you have a track record established, there is always the possibility that your column will be picked up by one of the syndicates and sold nationwide. If this happens, the income from each column can become rather significant.

Along with the columns on the editorial page, there is usually a topical cartoon or two. These cartoons are usually drawn by some local artists and they will often use other people's gags. These

cartoonists can usually be contacted through the newspaper which uses their work. Writing gags for topical cartoons is much the same as writing them for any other cartoonist except that you will have the situation already in hand and need only to come up with a humorous twist to it. Most cartoons on the editorial page are either satirical or political in nature.

CHAPTER 12

WHERE ANGELS FEAR TO TREAD, WHAT IS OFF LIMITS

Remember the good old days in the movies when two people of the opposite sex were in bed together, both had to be dressed in pajamas and each had to have one foot on the floor, on opposite sides of the bed. Remember how shocked the audience was when they first heard someone say "virgin" on the screen and how Boston and several other cities banned "Gone With The Wind" because it contained the phrase, "Frankly, I don't give a damn." Remember when Jack Paar quit in a huff after his joke about a water closet was bleeped out by the network censors.

Remember when George Carlin did his famous skit based on the seven dirty words which you can't say on TV on the Johnny Carson show and what ruckus it raised. Well let me tell you that things have changed a lot since then!

They are now showing bedroom scenes on the daytime soaps which a few years ago would have been seen only on closed circuit TV in motels with colorful names like, "The Pink Panther" or "The Blue Fox Inn." I'm beginning to believe that most soaps have only two sets, a bedroom and the kitchen, and from what goes on in both of them, those are totally interchangeable. There are so many hells, damns and other four letter words in the script any more that it won't be long before the famous "F" word will become commonplace. Is it any wonder why the average six year old of today has the vocabulary of a drunken sailor.

I mentioned earlier that the Los Angeles Times STYLEBOOK says that Obscenity, Profanity and Vulgarity are by no means synonymous. According to those editors, "Obscenity refers to words or acts which are offensive to one's feelings or to prevailing notions of modesty. Another definition is simply something disgusting or repulsive." What is offensive, disgusting or repulsive to one person might not be to another. The Supreme Court, with all of its collective legal knowledge, can't seem to agree on what constitutes obscenity.

"Profanity refers to the showing of disrespect or contempt of sacred things: irreverence." Some people see everything as being profane while others consider nothing sacred.

"Vulgarity is the state of being vulgar, crude, coarse, unrefined, boorish, indecent or obscene." This seems to cover all bases not touched by the first two words, including discharges of intestinal gas. But the thing which bothers me is why people will pardon themselves when they belch yet they laugh when they fart?

Clearly there is some overlapping between the words but basically it can be said that most words or phrases with sexual connotation are considered obscene, those with religious connotation are considered profane, and those with an excremental connotation are simply vulgar.

What this all means is that in today's society, if one is so inclined, he can get away with writing just about anything that he can spell. However, I for one, believe that any writer worth publishing should have an adequate way with words which allows him to express his thoughts in much more socially

acceptable language. Our craft is built on words and with those words, we should be able to paint mental pictures of what we want to say without having to resort to gutter language.

About the only time when unsavory language may logically be used is when writing dialogue for some character who is so base, so crude and so vulgar that it is not only logical, but it is what one would expect him to be saying. Even then, it is often preferable to simply describe how he talks and what he might be saying rather than putting a lot of four letter words inside quotation marks. A good illustration of this is how I described the language of a six year old. I did it by transferring the reader's mind to people who are famous for swearing instead of actually spelling out what some foul-mouthed kid might be saying.

While vulgarity and obscenity might be running amok in today's writing, we can take some solace in the fact that profanity is still an area which has yet to find favor in print. While there are plenty anti-religious jokes going around, at least they haven't found much of a market in published form. In fact, even the slightest reference to the deity can cause such terror into the hearts of most editors that they often pass up good humor which might otherwise be totally acceptable. The only cartoon that I can remember which poked fun at God was published in *Look* magazine many years ago. It was a operating room scene with several doctors standing around a patient and two nurses talking. One of the doctors had a glow around him. One nurse saying to the other, "That's God. He thinks that he is a doctor."

I understand that the magazine got a load of hate mail about that cartoon. They tried to placate the upset readers by publishing an apology and firing the cartoon editor who accepted it. I wish that I had thought of that gag, it was a gem.

I've participated in the sport of flying sailplanes for a number of years and in the course of this involvement, am an occasional contributor to their national magazine, *SOARING*. In addition to general articles on safety, training or glider performance, I would occasionally receive an assignment to cover a national contest or event. I received such an assignment from the editor who asked if I would provide him with an article about the annual Taos Soaring Fiesta, one of the best known social and non-competitive events in the sport.

I was collecting notes in order to write what was going to be just another one of those rather boring articles about Joe flying this far and Sam going so high until one evening when we were gathered around the motel pool for a wine and cheese party. I'm not really sure how it came about, but one of the pilots told a story about soaring with an eagle at 18,000 feet and how the eagle seemed to have a pissed look on his face because he was in his thermal. This seed sprouted and grew into the following article which defies every canon of humor. I knew better but I allowed my enthusiasm to get the better of me and wrote a humorous article about God. Not only did I involve God in the humor, I also brought him down from his omniscience and gave him human qualities and emotions. As a final stroke of blasphemy, I gave the story a biblical title and form.

Since I was writing the article for a very specialized market, it contains a lot of inside humor and soaring terminology which few people other than glider pilots will recognize. In spite of this specialization, I'm sure that any reader will get the basic gist of the humor.

A PARABLE
Never Start A Fight With The Boss

By: *Jim Foreman*

It is written that God created the earth with its mountains and streams. When he was finished, he stepped back to admire his work and found that he had created a tiny valley in northern New Mexico which was so small that it would serve no apparent purpose at all. Since everything which God creates has a purpose, he said, "I will call this place Taos and it will be the home for the Hopi and the Hippie (or something to that effect). I will give the eagle dominion over the valley and provide strong thermal currents so he can soar high in the sky to watch over his domain. I will send people called tourists each summer to provide food and clothing for the Hopi and the Hippie. In the winter, I will cause snow to fall upon the mountains to attract people from the land of the Tejas to come and play." When God found that the Tejas people played foolishly in the snow and broke their bones, he created orthopedic surgeons and Mercedes automobiles.

Time passed and the tourists came each summer and the Tejas people came each winter and the eagle soared high. All was well. Then, at the summer solstice, when the Hopi dance to corn and the Hippie smoke strange plants rolled in Zig-Zag papers, the eagle observed an unusual band of tourists arriving in the valley. Each one was dragging a large white cocoon behind his automobile. The eagle watched in awe as the cocoons went through a metamorphosis and sleek birds with long wings emerged from them. Some of these birds were made of glass from the sands, others were made from metals from the mountains and a few were of wood from the forests. The eagle laughed, "Look at those silly birds with only one foot as they lean on a wing to keep from falling over."

Then to his amazement, one by one, these new birds began to take flight, being towed aloft by clinging to a rope attached to the tail of smaller roaring birds bearing the mark of a young bear. When they would reach a certain height, they would release from the Cub-birds and begin to circle in the eagle's thermal, joining him in soaring flight.

"I will climb so high that they cannot follow," thought the eagle as he beat his wings against the thin air. But up and up climbed the new birds until they were mere specks high in the sky. This was just too much for the eagle to accept, so he called on God to rid the sky of these new birds.

"God, strange new soaring birds have invaded my sky. They are much larger than I, each one carries a tourist in its beak and they can fly as high as the clouds, or at least to 18,000 feet. I might be able to drive one of them away, but there must be 30 of them up there right now. Besides, they have at least 20 points better L/D than what you gave me and they can climb right through me."

God replied, "I can't have something like this happen to my eagle! I will stamp my feet to raise a cloud of dust to blind them, I'll bring down rain to wet their wings so they cannot fly, and I'll blow great winds to destroy the birds and dry the throats of the tourists who brought them to this valley." And did he ever!

The next afternoon, the eagle squawked at God, "They are back! They are back! They are in my sky right now! You didn't do any good at all yesterday! The tourists simply lashed the birds to the ground so they would not blow away, they washed the dust from their bodies in pools of water at the places where tourists stay, and they quenched their thirsts with bottles of Rocky Mountain Spring Water, brewed with your finest barley and hops."

God was really steamed at the eagle's report, so this day he danced even faster, brought down a deluge of rain and blew with all his might, directly across the runway on which the birds would have to alight. But alas, his efforts were of no avail because the strange new birds, with the strong winds in their faces, were able to land across the runway with almost no forward motion at all. As soon as they touched their foot to the ground, a horde of tourists would rush to their aid and keep them from being blown away until they could be lashed to the ground or returned to their cocoons.

The third day came and the eagle screamed at God, "You really blew it again yesterday! Can't you do anything right? Those birds are back in my sky again."

God replied, "Eagle, I've been observing these new birds and they seem to be nice enough. None of them have attacked you, they don't eat your rabbits and they don't pollute the sky; so what's your beef?"

"But," protested the eagle, "they can fly higher and faster than what you made me able to do. I heard that one of them flew ten thousand zeolups (that's eagle talk for about 500 kilometers) around a triangle using Villa Grove and Espanola as turnpoints. It would take me three days to make such a flight and the tourist in its beak had flown only 30 hours in those soaring birds. When I had that little flying time, I did well to keep from falling off my perch when I landed. And, what is even worse, the bird that he made the flight in is called a Zuni, not even a Hopi or Hippie that you created this valley for."

By this time, God was getting rather ticked at the eagle and said, "Eagle, you are always bitching about something. First it was that the rabbits I provided were too small and hard to catch, so I made them grow fatter and run slower; then it was about being bored, so I furnished you with a mate, but you said that she was a nag; and now it is about these new birds. What does it take to keep you happy?"

The eagle whined, "It's just not right. You made me and people with funny names made those other birds. Besides, they are much better at soaring than I am. Am I a factory reject or just another one of your stupid mistakes?"

God replied, "You are no factory reject and I don't make mistakes."

"How about the size of avocado seed?" snapped the eagle.

"Don't get on my case about the size of avocado seed," roared God. "I get enough static about that from the guacamole people. Besides, I think that they are just the right size."

"If avocados were as big as watermelons!" retorted the eagle.

"That does it!" thundered God, adding a lightning bolt for punctuation. "One more word and you'll spend the rest of your life as a turkey, you arrogant bag of feathers. I don't care if you are a national symbol, go eat a lizard!"

The eagle flew off to the top of Wheeler peak to sulk, God took the rest of the week off and the new birds flew and flew. A great time was had by the tourists, the Hopi and the Hippie prospered and all was well.

I had more fun with that story than any that I had written in years. I fired it off to the editor and less than a week later, received his rather caustic reply.

"Dear Jim;

You've got to be kidding! I wouldn't publish that thing for all the tea in China. It's downright sacrilegious. If I ran that story, I'd get a ton of mail and lose my job for sure. Send me something that I

can print or else forget it!

Sincerely,
Doug"

As soon as my knuckles stopped smarting, I sat down at my typewriter and made him happy by cranking out the usual six manuscript pages of journalistic pap about Joe flying this far and Sam going so high. It was published in the next issue of the magazine but I doubt that many people read it.

About four years passed and I had all but forgotten about that story until one morning when the phone rang. The person on the other end of the line said that he was the new editor of SOARING Magazine and while going through some old files, had come across something which I had written called "A Parable". He said that it was the funniest story about soaring that he had ever read and asked if he had my permission to have it professionally illustrated and run it. Naturally, I agreed.

After being published in the US, it was reprinted in both the British and Australian gliding magazines, and after being translated, it was published in the German Soaring Magazine. A year later, it received the annual Joseph Lincoln Memorial Award for the best published book or article on soaring.

The former editor proved to be correct to a certain extent in his prediction that it would provoke protest mail. I anticipated a nasty letter of some sort from the Taos Chamber of Commerce about my Hippie reference because they were doing everything possible to disassociate themselves from the rather large hippie community that had sprung up near there, but never heard a word from them. The only negative letter that the magazine forwarded to me was from someone in Kentucky with three first names who signed it with the title of "Reverend." The letter began, "THOU SHALT NOT USE GOD'S NAME IN VAIN!" He even drew three lines under that admonition. His diatribe continued for four single-spaced pages explaining that God was far too serious a subject to be used in humor and that my only hope to escape His wrath was to get down on my knees and beg to be forgiven for my journalistic sins. He ended his sermon with a final warning, "God is almighty and far too serious to think that anything is funny."

I answered the letter from the Reverend with three first names as nicely as possible. I thanked him for taking the time to write about my article but I felt that God must have a sense of humor and enjoyed a good joke, otherwise he would never have created cherry tomatoes.

In the good old days of Black and White TV, announcers weren't even allowed to uncork a bottle of beer on camera, much less take a swig of it. This has also changed.

While good old JR Ewing can swill down one Bourbon and Branch after another and former ball players have shouting matches as to whether a certain beer tastes better or is less filling, the mere mention of booze in a humorous article will often provoke letters of protest. The fellow writer who I mentioned earlier, Andy Anderson, writes a monthly column called Back Roads for MotorHome Magazine. It is without a doubt, one of the more popular articles in the whole magazine.

Andy had written a book a few years back, called The Two Ton Albatross, which was a story about retiring from the Air Force and pulling a travel trailer from Washington DC to California via the Canadian Transcontinental Highway. He uses some of the great stories from the book as a basis for some of his monthly articles. Most of the stories began after he had stopped for the night, settled the trailer into a parking spot and was relaxing a bit while waiting for Big Red, his wife, to prepare dinner. He usually referred to having a "Dallop of Scotch" while he wandered about the camp searching out the strange and interesting creatures or characters which he always seemed to be able to find.

After about the third monthly article in which he mentioned having a drink was published, several rather critical letters appeared in the "Letters to the Editor" column about Andy's stories. One of the writers referred to his "unusual preoccupation with drinking hard liquor" while another asked if all retired

Air Force Officers were drunkards and the third berated the editor for allowing such unwholesome references to mixing of alcohol and recreational vehicles to be published. Andy's great stories continue to be published each month, but he has dropped all references to drinking.

Unless drinking is a vital part of the plot or situation, a humor writer would probably be better served to simply leave any such reference completely out of the story. If it is an integral part of the story, he should keep the hero stone sober and leave the boozing up to the town drunk. It seems that when it comes to readers, there are far more Blue Nose Zealots than people with a sense of humor, or perhaps they are simply more vocal.

CHAPTER 13

FINDING A MARKET FOR YOUR WORK

This book has finally come full circle. It is ending as it began, by telling you that it isn't the ultimate reader who you have to please, but it's some faceless, and perhaps nameless, editor. If you can't find an editor who has enough faith in your story to invest some of the publisher's space and money in it, then your humor will never become ink on paper. No matter how well written, or how outrageously funny it might be, all of your work and ideas will be down the drain unless you can find that particular editor who will print it. So, just how does one go about finding the most productive place to send his work?

In the first place, a query letter from an unknown author is a waste of time because the editor has no idea of what or how you write. No matter how good your idea might sound, he probably won't even bother to respond. Query letters only work for you after you have sold a certain editor one or two previous articles and he knows what he can expect to see from you. Even if he already knows you and your work, he had much rather see the finished manuscript. Naturally, you should enclose a cover letter with any submission, whether it is your first to that editor or the tenth. More on writing cover letters later in this chapter.

Considering that you are yet to become a highly published author, then you would probably be wasting both time and postage by sending your material to magazines such as Readers Digest, Redbook and Esquire. Your work could be just as good as much of what they presently use, but unfortunately, you lack the name recognition which they are buying as much as the content of the articles. The big-name publishers receive thousands of unsolicited submissions each month and most of them are dumped into what is known as the "slush pile" where if they are read at all, it is by someone far below the editorial levels.

An editor from Readers Digest, who was attending a recent writers conference, stated that they automatically return without reading, all unsolicited submission which are not in the accepted form. He said that they did this because they had found that if the author didn't know the basic form for submission, then they usually lacked the basic ability to write to their desired standards. I'm sure that Readers Digest is not alone in this policy.

For those magazines which do read most of what is sent to them, it is usually done by college english and journalism students or by various office staff members who scan through articles between their regular tasks. In either case, it is very difficult for an unknown author to get a reading of his work by someone who is in a position to make a final decision on it.

An editor for one of the larger book publishing houses said that they have a slush pile reading party every Friday night. They order in pizzas and beer for the twenty or thirty people who will be reading that night. When they divide up the boxes of manuscripts which have come in that week, it is not unusual for each reader to have up to half a dozen to look at. Since it would be impossible for any one person to eat his pizza, drink his beer and read that many manuscripts in a couple hours, the best that they can do is give each one a quick scan. This usually consists of reading the synopsis, the list of chapters and possibly the first one or two chapters. He also said that unfortunately, the readers seldom look for the best manuscript but instead, it often turns into a contest to see who can find the worst one. Once in a while, the

cream will rise to the top of the slush pile and your work be seen by a real editor, but not often.

So how does an aspiring humor writer get his work seen by an editor and hopefully, published? Rather than beating your head against the wall trying to break into that elite dozen or so big publications, try fishing in the smaller ponds. Remember that three little fish will make as good a meal as one big one. At last count, there was something like 50,000 regional magazines, trade publications, in-house magazines and weekly newspaper inserts such as Parade, Review and Lifestyle. Look over the magazines which come into your own mailbox for ideas. If you receive and read a certain magazine on a regular basis, then you should be aware of what they like to publish and would know whether your article would fit or not. If a magazine uses short filler pieces, try a few of those first as a method of introducing yourself to the editor.

Without a doubt, the best place for an author to meet editors, agents and fellow writers is at writing seminars. Many colleges offer professional writing seminars during the summer months and the better ones are able to attract editors from some of the top publishing houses to be guest speakers. After the general sessions, these editors usually hold small forums in which they meet with authors on a personal basis. This is where you can give them a quick sketch of what you have written and learn whether they would be interested in seeing it or not. If they show an interest in your idea, then you can hand it directly to them or else mail it to their attention.

Quite often, what you have written might not be what this particular editor is seeking, but he will possibly give you the name of another editor with his firm who might like to see it. The benefit of having the name of a particular person to address your submission to is that it will usually go directly to that person's desk without being opened in the mail room. This greatly improves your chances that the right person will look at what you sent.

Another group of people who attend seminars as guest speakers are literary agents who are seeking a few new writers to represent. Some of the agents who appear will be relatively new people in the business who are wanting to establish a file of clients. The more established agents may be there to replace lost clients or else to expand their list. Either way, if they are willing to take the time to appear at these seminars, they are going to be receptive to all new writers who would care to visit with them.

If you attend one of these writing seminars, take whatever you have ready to show with you and if it has any merit, there is a good chance that either an editor or agent will take it with him. Even if he returns it to you after it has been at his office for a while, he will usually write a short note to you outlining why he could not use or sell it for you. This can be most valuable information for you to use in order to avoid the same mistakes on the next article. You can rest assured that if an agent is willing to take the time to read your material, then he feels that you have something worthwhile. After all, the only way that they make any money is by selling your work and they aren't about to waste time on something which they feel to be unsalable.

All legitimate agents work on a commission basis and they don't get paid unless they sell something. Any agent who asks you to pay him for reading your material or asks for any sort of advance fee should be avoided like the plague.

While attending a serious seminars may seem to be rather expensive, consider the vast amount of information, help and personal contacts that you can derive from having been there. Costs of these seminars vary considerably, as does what they offer in return. However, almost without exception, any professional writing seminar offered by the writing department of a college or university will return vast dividends for money spent. If you get nothing else from attending, the enthusiasm that it will generate in you will be worth the cost.

The next place to look for a market is in Writers Market. While this directory is published

annually, it is often out of date by the time that it hits the bookstores and libraries. Editors change, policies change and publications go in or out of business. However, it is still the best locally available source of information available to the writer. Each listing will give the name and address of the publication, as well as what field they generally cover. It may also give the names of various editors and, hopefully, the humor editor. As I said before, having the name of an editor to whom you can address your submission is a big step in the right direction. The listing often gives areas in which they are seeking material as well as what they are not interested in seeing. Many of the magazines will send you sample copies, writing guides and payment schedules if you request them.

Once that you have written your humor piece and picked the most likely target, let's talk about the accepted form for submitting it. If you go down to the grocery store to buy a gallon of milk, you expect it to be in a plastic jug with a lid. What would you do if you got there and all their milk was in paper bags--you'd walk away. The same is true when it comes to packaging your work for presentation to an editor. He expects it to be in the form which he is accustomed to seeing.

If you do your writing on a word processor or computer, then it is very easy to tell it just what to do. If you write on a typewriter, then you have to put the proper heading on each page individually. All submissions, with the exception of those going to newspapers, should be typed double space on plain white paper. For some reason, newspaper editors like to see triple spaced submissions. The margins should be set for 60 characters per line and 25 lines per page. This gives an average of 250 words per page which makes it easy for the editor to judge the space that it will require. The title, author's name and chapter number should appear at the top of each page and those pages be numbered sequentially from front to back. Even if your word processor is willing to do so, you should not justify the right margin of your work. Even though that makes it look nice and neat, it makes it more difficult to read.

At this point, I want to stress that I know of no editor who will even consider handwritten submissions. By the same token, one should never use a typewriter with script or other fancy type for manuscripts. Use nothing but black type, 10 characters per inch and standard size, white paper. Do everything that you can to make it easier for the editor to read your manuscript as it will greatly increase the possibility that he will read all of it.

This is a sample of the accepted form for the first page of a manuscript about THE COW THAT ATE TEXAS. On the first line is the title of the article. At the right margin on that same line is the author's full name, followed by his address, phone number with area code and Social Security Number. They can't send you a check without your Social Security Number so they can file the proper forms with the IRS. This is the first page and the Number 1 should either be centered or placed at the right margin at the bottom of the page. If you write on a word processor using continuous paper, the pages should be separated and the perforated edges removed.

THE COW THAT ATE TEXAS

*Jim Foreman
2108 East Hills Dr.
Moore, OK 73160
Phone 405/799-1688
SSN 123-45-6789*

(Drop down to the middle of the page and write the title)

THE COW THAT ATE TEXAS

By: Jim Foreman

She was a big old yellow cow with one horn which pointed toward the sky and the other toward hell, the place from which she had most certainly spawned. She had the appetite of three bears, two elephants and a threshing crew.....

1

This is a sample of the headings for the second and following pages if there is more than one chapter.

COW THAT ATE TEXAS/Foreman

Chapter 1

While most of her bovine sisters were content to munch on the lush green grass which grew belly high as far as the eye could see, this old yellow devil much preferred the contents of picnic baskets, ice chests and.....

2

If it is a short article with only one chapter, this is the proper form for the heading.

COW THAT ATE TEXAS/Foreman

Page 3

She knew just how far the average person could hurl a rock and would stand about three feet past his maximum range.....

If there are fewer than eight to ten pages to be sent, including the cover letter, it is permissible for it to be folded once and mailed in a 6 X 9 envelope. When there are more than ten pages, it should be shipped flat in a 9 X 12 envelope with a cardboard stiffener. Manuscripts with more than about 50 pages should be sent in a cardboard box.

Now we come to the cover letter which should be sent along with every manuscript. This is a business letter and should be treated as such in every way, from the heading to the final signature. In this letter is where you introduce yourself to the editor and is certainly no place for you to show him just how funny you can write. Leave that up to the article. The first paragraph should be short and to the point, telling the editor what you are sending and why. Here is a sample first paragraph which you may use as is or alter to suit your needs. Naturally, the heading would include your name, address, telephone number and date of the letter.

*Mr. Sam Brown, Editor
AJAX MAGAZINE
1000 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10010*

Dear Mr. Brown:

Enclosed is the manuscript for THE COW WHICH ATE TEXAS. I am offering it for your consideration on a one-time use basis at your usual editorial rates. It has not been offered or published elsewhere.

If you have had this article, or a similar one, published elsewhere, be sure to tell him. If it has been published in another magazine, he probably won't care unless it is one which is in direct competition to his or else goes to basically the same list of people. While most editors do not demand absolute virginity in the articles that they buy, they really become upset if they feel that they have been betrayed by an author. If this happens, you might as well save the postage needed to mail anything else to them, because that will be the end to your association with that publication.

If you haven't made a sale to a particular editor, the second paragraph of the cover letter is used to tell him something about yourself which would be of interest or benefit to him. This isn't a resume and you aren't applying for a job, so include only the facts which are needed.

Since this is my first submission to you, please let me tell you a bit about my background. I am a freelance writer with articles published in such magazines as: Mechanics Illustrated, Accent West, Southwestern Art and Lifestyle. The content of these articles include technical, western history and humor.

No matter how many magazines have used your articles in the past, list no more than four in this paragraph. If you have a large number of clients, list those which you feel will impress him the most and those which publish articles with similar content to his. Remember, this is a simply a sketch about yourself to let him know a bit about your background. Even if you have never sold a word before, you can still use this paragraph to your benefit.

Since this is my first submission to you, please let me tell you a bit about myself. I am a sales manager for the Widget Company and write my own humor for use in my sales meetings. It goes over very well in spoken form, so I decided to see if it has similar appeal to a wider audience.

If your story is on a computer disk and you don't care to pay postage to get this printout back, use this as a last paragraph in your cover letter. Include a standard post card with your name and return address on it.

If you cannot use this material, please dispose of this copy and return the enclosed post card with any comments which you care to make.

Sincerely,

Jim Foreman

As a rule, I never ask for the return of anything shorter than about 50 pages in length. First, because it will usually come back in such a sad state that I would not care to send it out to another editor and the cost of postage would exceed the cost of running a new printout. A self-addressed post card invites the editor to make some comment which might be very useful in future dealings. For one thing, it puts him on a more personal basis with you and he might possibly give you a hint of why he rejected your story.

The final part of this chapter deals with keeping some sort of record where things are and where they have been. Some magazines will hold articles for several months and during that time, you can forget where it is. Also, knowing where it is and how long it has been there gives you a chance to follow up with a short note to the editor to be sure that he received it. I would say that two or three months is a reasonable length of time for something to lay on an editor's desk before you needle him. The best way to do this is by sending a very short, handwritten note saying that you were simply checking on your story to see if he had received it. Enclose a self-addressed post card with the name of the article in the upper left corner. This leaves him plenty room to respond. This is something which he can handle in a matter of seconds and does not need to involve his secretary. Most editors who want to hold an article for possible future use will send a postcard saying so. Some will even give you an approximate date on which they will make a decision.

The worst problem with the long turnaround time is that anything which is the least bit topical can be totally useless by the time that you could submit it to someone else. Yesterday's news is usually like yesterday's salad, too limp and wilted to be interesting. That is why I tend to stay away from topical issues, no matter how inviting they might seem at the time.

Some magazines budget their space for primary articles as much as two years in advance and it isn't unusual for eighteen months to pass between submission and the time that you actually see it in print. Most general interest magazines try to maintain a certain mix of articles in order to suit the greatest number of readers. That is that they try to have one article for each of their major departments, like health, fitness, travel, food, and yes, even humor in each issue. Then there are the various seasons and holidays that they have to take into consideration. Suppose you write an article which involves cooking a turkey, the only two months that would fit are November and December. Since most magazines pay on publication, a person can get quite a bit of material tied up in the pipeline before the checks start coming in.

I wrote a "turkey" story and it was held for almost two years before the magazine finally published it. I was aware that it would be usable only in November or December issues and was prepared for a long "hold" before it would see print. Here is the story and you can see that, no matter what the subject, the basic forms for writing humor apply. You will also note that it is also written from the woman's viewpoint. No matter which gender you might happen to be, you will have better results if you write from the viewpoint of the general readership of the magazine to which you submit the story.

WHEN IT'S YOUR TURN TO COOK THE BIRD

By: Jim Foreman

No one ever seems to know how the ultimate selection is made; if it's resolved in a committee meeting of some sort or simply by the laws of chance, but there comes the time in the life of almost every person when they are faced with the task or duty of hosting the holiday dinner for the whole family.

While the individual players might vary from one family to the next, this is a thumbnail sketch of the assemblage of kit and kin you can expect to descend on your house. At the peak of the family tree will be Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma, the self-ordained matriarch of the family, parks her walker where it will disrupt the greatest movement of traffic and launches into a litany of people who have died from various ailments. Interspersed between the medical histories of people that you've never heard of, she alternates between shouting instructions to the kitchen and yelling at the kids for making too much noise. Her cooking instructions usually center around, "Don't forget to put plenty salt the green beans while they are cooking, put lots of salt and butter in the mashed potatoes and don't use any of that artificial sweetener stuff because it causes cancer." If she could get her walker started, she would be in the kitchen, attacking every pot with the salt shaker. Around the family, she is known as "Old Salty".

Grandpa, who is both hard of hearing and flatulent, parks himself off in a corner where he cups his hand to his ear and shouts, "Sez What!" every time that he passes gas because he thinks the noise is someone talking to him. He can remember the smallest detail of something which happened in 1946 but can't remember what he had for breakfast.

Along with your parents come a whole bunch of aunts and uncles, trailing a variety of in-laws and outlaws. You probably won't be exactly sure where the in-laws stop and the outlaws begin, but you can be sure that at some point, your mother-in-law will mention that "nice girl" that her son almost married. There will be one aunt who always brings along her dog that she claims than can sing, but its screeching sounds more like fingernails on a blackboard. There will be another one who, even though she can't make Jell-O without scorching it, insists on helping cook. Her theory on cooking is, "If it's smoking, it's cooking. If it's black, it's done."

In spite of the fact that you have the menu planned to the last detail, another one of the aunts will charge into the kitchen and start whipping up her special holiday dish; a turnip, anchovy and jalapeno casserole which she calls her "Mexican Surprise". Everyone who has ever tried it calls it "Montezuma's Revenge".

Along with all the aunts will be at least two "funny" uncles.

One of them likes to sneak up behind you and grab a quick feel just when you have both hands full and can't slap him, however he is smart enough to keep out of your way when you have a knife in your hand. The other one knows the dirty lyrics to at least a hundred songs which all the kids will be singing before the day is over. His favorite trick is "Pull My Finger". It's enough to make you wonder why your parents seem to be the only normal people in the family.

Swinging from the limbs of the family tree at your own level are your siblings with their respective spouses, along with cousins by the dozens. The curious thing about cousins is that the older that they get, the more that they look and act like their parents. You'd need a scorecard in order to keep up with all the marriages, affairs, fights, divorces and other marital or domestic calamities which go on among them. Unless you happen to be an only child, there will be at least

one brother-in-law who brags incessantly about how much he is worth while another one will try to borrow money from you before the day is over.

Finally, there is an endless variety of creepers, crawlers, screamers, rug rats and yard apes. Don't forget the moody teenagers who walk around with Walkman headphones permanently attached to their skulls. The moment that the greatest pressure to get everything off the stove at the same time arrives, a swarm of little ankle-biters will surge into the kitchen, drag all the pots and pans out of the cabinets and leave them scattered around the floor like aluminum death traps. You no more than get everything stuffed back into the cabinets and the dish washer loaded with dirty pots, you discover that there is no hot water because one of the teenagers has taken a fifty-five minute shower with the water at full force.

In spite of all the unwanted help that you had in the kitchen, you finally get the meal on the table. In order to reduce the number of dishes to wash and give the water heater time to recover, you drag out paper plates and plastic forks. The instant that Grandma assumes her position at the head of the table, she says, "Food don't taste good on these things. Take them away and bring me a real plate and fork." Following her cue, twenty-six kids also refuse to eat off paper plates.

Finally, the adults and most of the big kids are seated around the big table, middle size kids are relegated to card tables or else sitting on the stairs and three or four babies are pounding their spoons on the trays of borrowed high chairs. One of the teenagers looks around at all the food on the table and says, "Like, ain't you got nothing good to eat?"

Ever since the days when you sat in a highchair and was first to get served, Grandpa has always been the one who asked the blessing and carved the bird. The only problem is that the years have taken their toll on his ability to both pray and carve. As he begins the blessing which everyone knows will cover every family member both living and dead, three boys seated at the coffee table in the living room come to the realization that since the bird has only two legs, one of them is going to stuck with a wing. A fight erupts to determine who the unlucky one will be. While the three boys are thrashing around on the living room floor, the singing dog bites one of them on an ear, which causes a considerable increase in the level of noise. Grandma yells for all the kids to keep quiet so Grandpa can finish the blessing.

In all the confusion, Grandpa gets sidetracked from the blessing and starts telling about when he tried to join the Navy the day after the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor but they turned him down because of flat feet. Grandma finally saves the day when she kicks Grandpa on the shins and yells, "Say Amen and shut up you old fool."

In his younger days, Grandpa could handle a carving knife like a brain surgeon wielding a scalpel. With long, deft strokes of a razor sharp knife, he could quickly convert a whole turkey into a neat stack of breast meat slices on one side of a mound of stuffing and a pile of drumsticks, thighs and wings on the other. However when the doctors put him on a new medication a couple years ago, they advised to keep all sharp objects away if he wanted to keep all his fingers and thumbs. The solution was to go high-tech, so someone bought him an electric carving knife just for these special occasions.

With his electric knife in one hand and a leg in the other, he began a hand-to-drumstick wrestling match with the turkey. Instead of simply holding the knife and letting the electric motor do all the work, he began to hack and saw away at the bird with it. Just when everyone thought that Grandpa was winning, the bird tried to escape by sliding off the platter and onto the antique lace tablecloth, knocking over three glasses of iced tea and sending a blizzard of little pink packets of artificial sweetener sailing in the air. Everyone at the table leaped to their feet to stem the tidal

wave of tea and rescue the Sweet and Low. While they were mopping up the flood, the straining motor on the electric knife gave up the ghost in a shower of sparks and a cloud of acrid smoke. Grandpa tossed the dead knife into a corner and announced that he was going to the car to get his pistol and then he'd show that bird who was boss. No one bothered to stop him because they knew that he hadn't owned a gun in forty years.

One of the funny uncles, who worked at an auto wrecking yard, decided that since the turkey and an automatic transmission were about the same size and shape, their disassembly should be similar, so he took over the carving. With his basic knowledge of hand tools limited to hammers and blow torches, when he finished with the turkey it looked like something which had been through the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. While all this was going on, one aunt poured more tea while another one retrieved Grandpa who was standing in the middle of the driveway, trying to remember what he was doing out there.

Plates were filled, conversation ceased and the room was filled with the happy sounds of chomping, chewing and slurping. Even the singing dog, which had been given the end piece of a wing to chew on, was quietly smearing grease on the carpet in the corner. Everyone's total attention was on the meal except for you. You are busy counting the number of brothers, sisters, cousins and other assorted relatives whose turn it will be to cook the bird before it comes around to you again.

See, there is almost no end to the subjects which can lend themselves to humor. This story works because just about everyone can identify with at least half of the people in this story.

A number of years ago, when I had just begun to write magazine articles, I sent a particular story out to a rather obscure magazine which I found listed in Writers Market. It was called *Coal People* and was published in the heart of West Virginia coal mining. From the information given about them in their write-up, they were looking for humor. I can't remember what the article was about but concluded that they would be an ideal market for that particular story. As it turned out, the editor returned it with a form rejection slip.

This story, along with several others, came and went from time to time. One day when I was searching for possible markets for some of my rejected articles, I noticed a certain magazine which seemed to be an ideal place to send that particular story, so I shipped it off with the highest of hopes. A week or so later, the story came back but this time it had a hand-written note from the editor clipped to the first page. It read, "I didn't like this story the first time that I read it and liked it even less the second time. I don't appreciate you trying to sneak a rejected story back across my desk."

I really felt silly for having sent an editor the same story twice and decided that if I was going to call myself a writer, I had to do something to keep up with what was going on. I established a card file system for my stories with indications of when and to whom each had been sent and when it was bought or returned. I would also know how many times a particular story had been rejected, which would give me a good idea about when it was time to stop wasting time and postage and give it a decent burial in the trash. Later, when I converted to a computer for writing, a simple data base program made the my record keeping much easier.

I couldn't simply lick the wounds caused by the slashing pen of an irate editor and decided that I would try to make the best out of a bad situation. I wrote him a very nice note as follows:

"Thanks for returning the story which I mistakenly sent to you the second time, and for the comment that I was trying to sneak it past you. I had much rather be known as sneaky than stupid any day. Since it is painfully obvious that you don't like that story, perhaps you could tell me what you would

like to see and I'll do my best to comply."

A week or so later, I received a very nice letter from the editor. In it, he said that his magazine dealt with the people involved in the coal mining industry and he would be open to any human interest article concerning present or past coal miners. The last part of his letter was the real surprise. "Since you live near Denver, would you care to represent this magazine and cover the Western Mining Exposition which is being held there in two weeks? Please call me collect if you can handle this assignment."

Our association which began on such rocky ground, lasted for about six years until I moved away from Colorado. During that time, I became their Western Correspondent with an assigned article or story of some sort in almost every issue.

I suppose that this proves the old maxim that if one is handed a lemon, the best thing to do with it is open a lemonade stand.