

The Mirror Has Two Faces
(Merging Comedy and Tragedy in the Christian Novel)
By
Janice Hanna Thompson



“Through humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.”
Bill Cosby

All around you, people are struggling. Suffering. Fighting to stay on top of their finances. Wondering if they should leave their marriages. Battling addictions. You’ve made up your mind to write a novel that will change their lives for the better.

Why, then, does a one-liner leap to mind instead of an intense plotline? Why does your mind gravitate to your favorite *I Love Lucy* episode or those quirky characters on *Everybody Loves Raymond*? With all of the angst in the world, why tickle the funny bone of your aching reader? Won’t that serve as a slap in the face, making her think you don’t care about the depth of her problem?

Certainly not! Humor writing is one of the best ways to share real answers in a non-hurtful way. A frown is merely a smile turned upside-down, after all.

Let’s examine the reasoning behind this phenomenon to see how — and why — you can impact lives with comedic writing.

Tragedy, at its core, evokes pity and fear. Humor writing points to the same problems your readers face but attempts to distract, to offer that “Calgon, Take Me Away!” opportunity. Does this mean the humor writer can’t address real/relevant topics? Au, contraire!

Here are seven steps you can take to beef up the humor in your stories:

STEP ONE: Use ordinary people. Think of Raymond here. Regular guy. Think of Lucy. Regular, (albeit quirky) gal. Novels with a comedic slant must meet the reader where he or she lives.

STEP TWO: Diversify your cast. Make sure you have distinctly different characters in your story. They need to have different taste in clothing, different political opinions, different lifestyles, different off-the-chart personalities, and different ways of dealing

with their troubles. Part of what made *I Love Lucy* work was the diverse cast. Have you ever known four more different people than Lucy, Ricky, Fred and Ethel?

STEP THREE: Employ the art of exaggeration. The writers of *I Love Lucy* discovered the finely tuned art of exaggeration resonated with viewers. If we examine the “real” story behind Lucy’s overblown antics, (think about the chocolate factory scene here, or perhaps the episode where she decided to bottle her own mayonnaise) we find a woman in an odd/mismatched marriage, a woman who struggles with figuring out where she fits in, a woman who wonders if she has any talents or abilities. If we present her problems in a comedic setting, every woman who’s ever felt out-of-place can suddenly relate. That’s why exaggeration works. It’s so wacky that we don’t realize we’re actually getting a life-changing message.

STEP FOUR: Who put the situation in sitcom? You! Deliberately put your characters in situations that make them squirm, then give the reader a roller-coaster ride of emotions as the characters try to weasel their way out of those situations.

STEP FIVE: Work in threes. Might sound funny, but people love things in threes. There’s a certain cadence to repeating something three times for effect or in presenting three odd characters who randomly appear together. (Think Larry, Mo and Curly.)

STEP SIX: Pacing: There’s much to be said about the placement of words, phrases and inflections. Pacing it truly everything in comedy. Zip, zip, zip! Pick up the pace. Don’t bog your reader down with lots of description or lengthy action beats. Keep it moving.

STEP SEVEN: Do the opposite thing. Your reader will expect your characters to respond in a certain way. Throw them off! Let your hero or heroine do something completely out of character.

Writers, you can make a difference in the lives of your readers, even those facing tragic circumstances and situations. Remind them that the mirror really does have two faces. Offer a chuckle, a smile, a hopeful situation through the lives of your characters, then watch their frowns turn upside-down.

SIDEBAR:

Delivering the Punch-line

If you’ve ever watched a true comedian at work, you appreciate the importance of a well-delivered punch-line. He delivers the setup, draws the audience into the story, gets them on the edge of their respective seats, pauses just the right length of time, and then. . .*bam!* Punch-line! The audience roars with laughter.

If you want to keep your reader laughing, you must become skilled at delivering the punch-lines in your story. You can create anticipation during the setup phase. Think of the comedian, prepping his audience. Don’t give away too much too soon. Adequately build the situation, then. . .*shazam!* Just as the reader clutches the book, breathless. . .*Punch line!*

We've spent a lot of time examining *I Love Lucy*, but there's a reason for that. Of all the situational comedies ever written, nothing surpasses the punch-lines in that show. Poor Lucy took a proverbial beating in every episode, but we didn't mind laughing at—or with—her. The punch-lines were beautifully placed. Every episode offered a situation, a setup and a “wowza” ending.

Here's an exercise that might help with your punch-line deliveries. Over the next week spend time watching late-night comics as they deliver their monologues. Pay particular attention to their setup and delivery. Then do your best to create situations for your characters that deliver equally as comedic outcomes.

ABOUT JANICE:

Janice Hanna Thompson is the author of nearly eighty novels for the Christmas market, most comedic or light-hearted in nature.