
CHAPTER

1

The Unknowable

A mysterious force sneaks up and tickles us from time to time – often several times a day. It finds us when we least expect it. It comes at us from every direction: TV, computer, and phone screens; the people and events in our lives; casual conversations; random mishaps; our own heads, where it pops in unannounced while we take a shower or sit in traffic.

Like a visit from a mischievous pixie, it invades our thoughts with a ridiculous image or idea.

The devilish spirit always surprises. It's a sudden puff of pepper in our faces that makes us sneeze. Even when we seek it out, going to comedy clubs, watching funny movies, or reading satirical articles, it still somehow surprises. When it finds us, or we find it, we do its bidding. We respond on cue.

We laugh.

We suffer some kind of seizure, a healing spasm that takes over our bodies. Suddenly transformed into heated kernels, we explode into popcorn as if destined to achieve this enlightened state. Anyone nearby notices immediately and wants to know, “What’s so funny?” Everyone wants in on this action. It’s so contagious, people nearby – including strangers – start laughing before they even know what’s funny.

But then, just as quickly as this sprite possesses us, it disappears without a trace.

What is this unknowable thing? Where does it come from? How is it generated? And why are we laughing at it?

We call it *humor*. And we need it. We need it the same way we need companionship, sunlight, clean air, and a good night’s sleep. Sometimes it’s our only weapon against life’s trials, challenges, and misfortunes. Without humor, the world would lose all color.

Yet, despite its importance in our lives, nobody can seem to explain what humor is. It defies definition with the same slippery and unpredictable impishness that brings it to us. It’s a trickster in the night with no name. It’s a faceless echo in a maze of mirrors. Our best effort to explain it after it leaves us is hopelessly vague and ignorant: “I don’t know – it was just funny.”

Full-time masters of the craft of humor, who make millions of dollars whipping it up, are as tongue-tied as the rest of us. “I don’t know,” they say, throwing up their hands, “I just come up with funny things.”

In recent decades, humor has been the subject of increasingly serious scientific study. Unfortunately, it falls far behind the study of every related category, including emotion, mental health, social behavior, relationships, and cognitive processes, but we'll take what we can get.

Love, for example, is a similarly powerful yet unseen force in the human experience. But that's where the similarity ends. The way we treat these two delightful aspects of life couldn't be more different. Love enjoys a depth and breadth of attention, fascination, and examination far in excess of humor. We write voluminous odes, songs, textbooks, poems, and stories about love. There are myriad counselors guiding us on how to get more of it and how to strengthen what we have of it. The state recognizes and codifies love with legal contracts, licenses, and laws. Love powers a \$70-billion-a-year wedding industry.

Humor is the poor cousin, always left behind, in the boondocks, in a sketchy neighborhood, barely getting by. An infinitesimal fraction has been written about humor, comedy, and the funny arts. There are no comedy counselors. The state couldn't care less if we never laughed, and nobody gives out licenses for it. It does, however, make some money, though not nearly wedding-industry money. People all over the world pay for streaming services, comedy shows, books, magazines, nightclubs – and more – just trying to get a taste of it.

Laughter is the best medicine, so the saying goes. But if it's such effective medicine, why can't anyone describe how the medicine works? Why do we not have specific directions to the drug store where we can get it? Why is its manufacture a cryptic rite? Imagine a pharmaceutical

company that doesn't know how to make penicillin or aspirin. That's us with humor. We leave it up to chance. We watch a sitcom, a silly movie, or a sketch, and sometimes we find it hilarious; other times, we're left disappointed. There are no guarantees in humor.

We seem determined to keep humor outside our conscious awareness, as if knowing too much about it will spoil it.

This book attempts to remedy, in a tiny way, the short shrift society has traditionally given to humor. And although I can't guarantee that if you consume the pages ahead you'll always know where to find it and your own attempts at it will always succeed, I can offer some collective wisdom that will at least help you appreciate humor when you catch it and make you more confident when you create it.

Failing this moonshot effort, *The Elements of Humor* nonetheless pursues the worthwhile goal of giving humor its due. It does this by providing a detailed framework for the concept of humor, with terms we can all use and categories we can all understand. It provides clear and specific instructions for whirling the mysterious particles that create humor, and in the process, demystifies the activity. Laid out in the chapters ahead are the best practices for bringing more humor into our lives and spreading it wherever we go, to brighten our days and the days of everyone around us.

The *How to Write Funny* series, my other books on the art and craft of humor, is a set of comprehensive, academic books intended to help the professional comedy writer compose

better material. They're the equivalent of a scientific article on the subject in a journal only other scientists read.

This book takes a broader approach. It's for the layperson. It's for the nonprofessional as well as the would-be professional. It's for the hobbyist who wants more humor in the world. It's for the shy introvert who's afraid to say anything, let alone something funny. It's for the nervous hopeful trying to ask a crush for a date. It's for the corporate keynoter, toastmaster, and copywriter. It's for anyone who wants to get better at making people laugh. It's for anyone who believes that humor is important enough to take seriously.

For the humorist, it's a style guide. Just as Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is the essential guidebook for serious writers, showing them how to compose sentences with economy and pointing out where the commas should go, *The Elements of Humor* strives to be the essential guidebook for serious humorists, showing them how to use the tools of humor and pointing out where the punchlines should go. (Hint: they should go at the end.)

E. B. White, the White in Strunk and White, fittingly uttered the most famous statement about the perils of analyzing humor, a grim warning quoted (most often misquoted) by just about everyone who has ever attempted to explain the concept of humor: "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can," he said, "but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." The quote comes from his short essay, "Some Remarks on Humor" (Harper Perennial, 2014), which serves as his resignation from the entire affair of explaining humor.

In it, he admits to finding humor “a complete mystery,” something so fragile and evasive that it crumbles if anyone tries to explain it.



He gave up too easily. We live in a crowded and competitive world. The stakes have been raised since the days of *The Elements of Style*. White, resuscitating and embellishing a set of tips written by his departed former teacher William Strunk Jr., provided a durable manual for clear and concise writing, and by extension, speaking. Their book has been the leader in the field for nearly a century. *The Elements of Humor* takes their important work a step further. The population of the world has increased eightfold since *The Elements of Style* was first published, and the multitudes have more accessible platforms to write, speak, create audio and video entertainment and communication – and distribute it worldwide – than Strunk and White could have imagined. In this fast-moving, technologically driven attention economy, clear and concise communication is nice – a minimum, competent standard, to be sure – but it’s no longer enough to rise above the din. With the added dimension of humor,

communication not only gets its point across, it does it with razzle-dazzle. It attracts more attention, builds stronger rapport, and stays longer in people's memory.

How This Book Is Organized

The book will begin by describing concepts and behaviors that you already know and can easily replicate. These introductory sections will make the skill of humor seem so simple that you'll wonder why an entire book is necessary to articulate how it works.

As the chapters go on, however, the concepts will get increasingly challenging, always building on the more basic concepts that precede them. By improving your aptitude for humor this way, you'll always have one foot planted on familiar ground before you take any bold steps forward into new territory.

Go at your own pace. You don't need to master the exercises in each chapter before moving on to the next. You can try any of these exercises at any time and experience the same benefits.

Some books on humor provide canned jokes you can use. This book will provide no such jokes, at least not intentionally. Canned jokes might get a laugh and might make you feel funny, but let's set a higher standard. Canned jokes are unnatural, inauthentic, and more sad than funny. The best humor stems from who you are. It works best when it's original, spontaneous, and accentuates your personality. Therefore, we'll spend some time getting you acquainted with yourself to find your comedy persona.

Real humor creates rapport between people. Canned humor creates distance.

The chapters ahead will offer many suggestions and examples, always with the intent to cultivate your innate sense of humor, something you can draw on effortlessly in any situation, conversation, or medium of entertainment.

Best Practices

- Use humor to elevate your communication to a new, impactful level.
- Produce, enjoy, and understand humor with the confidence that it's a legitimate and productive pursuit, despite its reputation for being frivolous.
- Don't use canned jokes.

Exercises

1. Look at the role of humor in your life. How do you get it? Where do you get it? How much of it do you create yourself?
2. Next time you laugh, allow yourself to take a moment afterwards to assess what made you laugh, and why.