

Obscure Chuckles

Before addressing the topic, I want to say something about one singular aspect of trying to write humour. I refer to the instant conflation in people's minds of the product with the person.

My poet friends here at the Writers' Residency may write work that is savage, despairing, exalted, full of rage or sexual obsession. Yet most of them are modest, balanced people (up till 9 pm) and nobody feels cheated by this fact any more. The fiction writers, dramatists, screen writers among them may present epic, anguished themes, yet nobody is disappointed if they themselves turn out to be retiring and contented. Essayists and other non-fiction writers are a little different; there's a certain expectation that they, like their material, will be scholarly and interesting (and I want to stress that in terms of those I've met here, I have not been disappointed – of course).

But if you write humour, there's an almost universal expectation that *you* also will be funny. The result is that in the flesh, we disappoint more readers than writers in any other genre.

Now the topic: the ways in which cultural changes are affecting humour. My culture in Aotearoa / New Zealand is that of a small country. In spite of recent growth, we're likely to remain small in the future. And one quality of our humour is the defensiveness of the little guy, the sometimes prickly expectation of being condescended to because of our size, and a tendency to pre-empt such condescension. You see it in NZ satirist Tom Scott's lovely definition of New Zealand: "Help! Three million people buried alive in the South Pacific!"

More culturally significant, perhaps, is the fact that we're a small country close(ish) to a much larger country. I refer to the noble nation of Australia. And like any small country, we rejoice in humorous narratives where we can make guerrilla raids on our bigger neighbour.

For example, Australians maintain that we pronounce the "i" vowel in words like "grit" or "tin" as an "uh" sound - "grut" or "tun". This is a vile calumny, of course, but occasionally it has been used to our advantage. One urban myth in our country refers to the graffiti that supposedly appeared on a Sydney overbridge: "NEW ZEALAND SUX". Next morning, according to the story, another hand had painted below it: "AUSTRALIA NIL"

We're a culture whose national identity, and therefore national humour, is very much bound up in sport, and the only cultural change I can see happening there is the way our slowly-increasing diversity has meant a larger number of sports we can make jokes about. Some years back, there was an infamous incident in a cricket international between New Zealand and Australia. We were losing – of course; we have so many small-nation, self-deprecating jokes about our usually inept cricket team. They're called The Black Caps, and it's sometimes suggested that this is because they play like toadstools.

Anyway, the nature of this particular cricket game changed suddenly. New Zealand seemed about to score an unlikely win. We were batting, and from the last ball of the game, six runs were needed to win. In cricket, the only way to score six runs from one delivery is to hit it over the boundary fence on the full. The anxious Australian captain – in Australia, losing a cricket match to NZ is a capital offence – ordered his bowler to bowl his last delivery along the ground underhand, thus making it impossible to hit high in the air. This wasn't illegal under the rules, but was emphatically contrary to the spirit of the game. Australia won as a result. Next morning on the streets of Auckland, people were wearing T-shirts with the slogan "AUSSIES HAVE AN UNDERARM PROBLEM." I wonder if that quality of finding humorous material in defeat is particularly characteristic of a small, edgy culture.

As I said before, Aotearoa/New Zealand is gradually becoming more multi-cultural. But in the decades when I was growing up, we were essentially bi-cultural: Maori and Pakeha

(European – eg me). My parents would have been appalled to think that they were racist in any way, yet they, like so many people of their generation, made “jokes” about “Maori Time,” meaning an unreliability about punctuality. About “Maori PT” (Physical Training), meaning resting or sleeping. About a “Maori car”, meaning a beat-up old vehicle. One Prime Minister of NZ in the 1980s used such terms publicly, and was reluctant to apologise.

The renaissance of Maori culture during recent decades, plus – I hope – a greater awareness on the part of many Pakeha, has meant that such expressions are no longer seen as funny. One delightful exception is that they've been appropriated and subverted by a number of Maori artists and performers, to unsettle and chasten the culture that coined them.

Now we also have Pasifika – Pacific Islands – and Chinese comedians who play with European stereotypes of the feckless, innocent native or the Asian entrepreneur; Indian playwrights who have had success with plays set in the archetypal Indian-owned corner store (yes, just like *The Simpsons*); writers from Eastern Europe who use their experience of cultural dislocation in funny and sobering fiction or nonfiction. For NZ, it's meant a widening and shifting of humorous writing.

New Zealanders are also people who travel a lot outside their country, and I suggest that this habit, with the experience of seeing through wide open, somewhat startled eyes, as Laura Fish described so neatly in last week's panel, has affected the nature of our humour. We of course aren't alone in this shock of the new, but I do wonder if for us, there's a higher “*This* is how they do things over here?” content, combined with that defensiveness I mentioned earlier at being reminded of how insignificant we are in the world.

Certainly, since I've been here, I've been constantly delighted – and amused – by all sorts of little felicities. Coming across the name of a University building: “THE BLANK HONORS CENTRE”. Buying a book on my first day here, saying “Thank you” to the shop assistant – which in NZ would have ended the conversation – and then having her reply “You're welcome”, which so delighted me that I exclaimed “That's lovely!”, to which she replied “You're welcome,” and I had this instant vision of an exchange of courtesies that might continue till the heat-death of the Universe. Overhearing another conversation, which I've changed slightly to save myself from bruising: A: “Whare are you frahm?” B: “Svitzerland.” A: “That's incredible! Ah'm from Arkansas!”

It's not only Americans who are funny, of course. I was talking to the excellent Andrea Hirata a few days back. “How long has your family been living in Indonesia?” I asked. A look of uncertainty and some consternation crossed Andrea's face. After a little discussion, I realised it was that “i / uh” New Zealand pronunciation again, and Andrea had thought I was asking how long his family had been loving in Indonesia. For generations, I'm sure, Andrea.

These are all trivial moments, of course, and like nearly all examples of comedy, they evaporate when they're analysed.

No, sorry, they aren't trivial. I know there's still debate over whether humans are the only species who laugh, who have a sense of humour. Some studies apparently suggest that bonobos enjoy slapstick and pratfalls. But certainly for *Homo sapiens*, humour can be a social cement, an art form, and an affirmation of our individual significance. It's the small person's weapon against oppression. Aotearoa / New Zealand is an immensely fortunate place in terms of personal freedoms, but 30 or so years back, we did have a Prime Minister with dictatorial inclinations who brought in a series of very harsh financial measures. Within weeks, small, plastic, children's-type savings banks, the sort where you put your money through a slot in the top, were on sale throughout the country. They were cast in the shape of this Prime Minister's emphatically porcine features, which had already earned him his nickname. Yes, our Prime Minister called Piggy had been turned into a Piggy Bank.

Laughter states that we matter. In my small country, I feel privileged to try and write material which may occasion it.

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 17, 2010:

Farhad A.K. Sulliman Khoyratty (Mauritius), Maryia Martysevich (Belarus),

David Hill (New Zealand), Pola Oloixarac (Argentina) and Najwan Darwish (Palestine)

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