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Writing the Comedy Movie, by Marc Blake. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, 272 pp.

Matthew McKeague

E. B. White once suggested that analysing humour is much like dissecting a frog, in that it dies in the process (17). However, Marc Blake's *Writing the Comedy Movie* defies White's suggestion, clarifying the rules of comedy writing in an engaging and academic text. Despite the common belief that comedy cannot be taught, Blake fights these assumptions through the text's 272 pages, covering the formulas and patterns of successful comedy films.

The text's first five chapters serve as an introduction to writing comedy and the industry's structure of jokes, sketches, and films. Practical tips are shared throughout this section, such as writing style, crafting the perfect title, and what information must be included in the first ten pages of a film script. Interwoven with such practical information is a brief history of comedy, spanning from vaudeville to the current era. As if writing a synthesised literature review on comedy itself, Blake creates a thoroughly sourced text with example films, scenes, and characters from media in our popular culture. These discussions of the comedy industry serve as a crash course in concepts learned from practical experience, allowing readers to take in information and connect it back to the art of storytelling, rather than coming across like a list of steps one must follow to crank out uninspired comedic content.

In the remaining sixteen chapters of the book, Blake analyses the subgenres of comedy and their trends, focusing on a number of them in detail. An in-depth analysis is provided for the following subgenres: screwball, romantic, teen, stoner, gross-out, parody, mockumentary, dark, farce, sketch films, action, animated, buddy movies, bromance, on-the-road, Christmas, sports, military, prison, and biopic. Many of these subgenre breakdowns also contain descriptions of their plot structure, typical scenes, and stock characters, providing readers with a set of standardised terminology and story components. With such a collection of detailed descriptions, academics can use the text's information to discuss and analyse specific components of media. Entertainment writers can also benefit, learning about media tropes and familiarising themselves with the market and audience expectations.

In comparison to other similar texts regarding comedy writing, *Writing the Comedy Movie* takes less of a "how to" approach, and instead, stands as a synthesis of film patterns and formulas. Blake is able to focus on comedy summarisations of film, rather than other texts that cast wider nets such as John Vorhaus's *The Comic Toolbox*, Mel Helitzer and Mark Shatz's *Comedy Writing Secrets*, Sally Holloway's *The Serious Guide to Joke Writing*, and Steve Kaplan's *The Hidden Tools of Comedy* . These comparable texts, though addressing similar concepts, provide more of a step-by-step approach to teach the craft of writing. However, Blake's *Writing the Comedy Movie*

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performs a deep dive into film genres and tropes, allowing readers to learn about comedy like a content analysis of the industry. Thus, this book serves as an effective complementary text when read after or alongside the "how to" collections. Blake addresses this with a caveat in the text, directly referencing the other books one should also read to learn structure of comedy across all media and its writing tactics, instead of solely relying on his introductory chapters.

The author's selection of film examples must also be commended, as Blake incorporated not only critically acclaimed films such as *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), but also cult classics. For example, when explaining the idea of a "call back" to previous jokes in a film, Blake includes the film *Airplane* (Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, 1980) and its use of literal interpretations. In this example, a stewardess questions the doctor on the plane with "Surely, you can't be serious", and he responds with: "I am serious. And don't call me Shirley." Continuing, to assist readers' understanding of slapstick, the author includes Woody Allen's early comedies such as *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), and *Sleeper* (1973). Later, the art of adding emotion and relatable characters into comedy is also addressed, making recurring references to such films as *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (John Hughes, 1987). From *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936) to *Bridesmaids* (Peter Feig, 2011), a variety of film examples are included to cement ideas, particularly if the reader has seen the films before. Those going into the book without an extensive film viewing history will miss references and will have to do some homework in order to fully grasp the content within the text. As Blake says, "the more comedy movies you watch, the more you learn about staging, characterization, plotting, and how comedy works" (2). However, some of the inclusions of these films lack the proper context for those who have not seen them. Thus, it is a missed opportunity to not include portions of scripts within the text. If portions of scripts were included throughout the book, this would allow readers to connect Blake's summarised material with examples of writing from within each subgenre.

Throughout the book, Blake also addresses an important aspect of comedy—pushing boundaries and potentially offending people, if necessary, with the goal of leading to an improved society. These idealistic comedic goals should be commended, particularly during a time when there seems to be increased pressure on media outlets to be more politically correct. Blake effectively discusses how comedy is a means to lead to social change and challenge norms, which may be threatened if pressures from social media outrage and advertisers continue to gain power over comedic content funding and cancellation. While films such as Kevin Smith's *Dogma* (1999) or Trey Parker's *Team America World Police* (2004) may not have initially reached large audiences for tackling taboo topics like religion and US foreign policy, Blake addresses how these films not only served a valuable purpose, but also eventually grew legs and found dedicated, passionate audiences.

While the book is well sourced and follows a logical arrangement with its comedy analysis and subgenre discussion, some of its later chapters lack a solid connection to the material. This weakness is first apparent in the sketch comedy chapter where a four-page interview is featured. The inclusion of similar interviews in previous chapters would help this section appear to be more cohesive with the text. Chapter 18 then goes into issues of campiness, described as an aesthetic sensibility that is funny because it is ridiculous and "cheesy" to a viewer. Though interesting, topics such as this feel like an abrupt change from the text's previous focus. This approach continues with discussions on censorship and The Hollywood Production Code that seem to veer

away from the book's goal of dissecting comedy, analysing its structures, and summarising its patterns.

Despite the text losing some focus in its later chapters, Marc Blake's *Writing the Comedy Movie* is a solid source of information that combines practical comedy tips in an academic context. The writing style is engaging and oftentimes funny, providing expert analyses with a variety of classic comedy examples taken from the last hundred years. *Writing the Comedy Movie* is honest from the outset, stating that very few film ideas are new, however, Blake masterfully combines these repeated elements, patterns, and tropes like a comedic historian in hopes of helping others create better content. As Blake says, "This is not a 'How To Write Comedy' book—there are plenty of those out there—but a survey of current trends, an analysis of what comedy is and does, and how it has succeeded both in the past in presently" (2). He certainly achieved this goal, with only a few bumps along the way in its last chapters. The text is fitting for academics looking to read about humour studies areas that have yet to be thoroughly represented in the literature. Lecturers will also be able to use this as a supplementary text in their comedic media courses as its writing style is friendly for undergraduate level instruction. At the same time, the text provides valuable insight into the comedy industry for those interested in learning about the craft, or perhaps rediscovering their passion for it.

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