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The Joke's on Me: The Role of Self-Deprecating Humor in Personal Narrative

The narrator of Mark Twain's 1879 essay, "A Presidential Candidate," sets out to make of himself a prime Presidential candidate by telling the reader in advance everything awful about himself, reasoning that his opponents "will be unable to rake up anything against him that nobody ever heard before" (3). The narrator eschews arrogance by exaggerating his negative traits and dastardly deeds to the point of absurdity, finally translating his uneasiness among poor people into a platform that advocates feeding the American working class to cannibals. In the end, this is not a personal reflection on the part of the narrator but a condemnation of the American political process and its fascination with detecting scandal. But Twain uses self-deprecating humor to get his point across clearly and amicably, without offending or isolating the reader.

Much of the personal nonfiction genre is characterized by a search for truth, and both honesty and confession must be employed along the way. To do so, the nonfiction writer often employs such literary devices as plot, setting, and characterization that are often considered the realm of fiction. At the heart of this endeavor is humor: no literary component demands reader engagement in quite the same way. Humor initiates a conversation and establishes a relationship with the reader. Self-deprecating humor, more specifically, invites the reader to truth, pain, and a good laugh. Of the many forms of humor employed by essayists and memoirists, self-deprecating humor is particularly useful for its ability to draw readers in, avoid arrogance and self-pity, and build character. Writers like David Sedaris, Nora Ephron, Ian Frazier, and Veronica Geng draw readers in with their uproarious personal stories and observations. Some of the

bestselling books on Amazon are written by comedians and TV humorists like Tina Fey and Billy Crystal. These authors take part in a tradition that reaches back to Montaigne's 1580 *Essais* and includes the likes of Mark Twain, George Orwell, James Thurber, and Francine Prose. Among those writers who have helped to shape the voice of humor in personal nonfiction, those featured in *The New Yorker* have made some of the more prominent contributions in modern literary history.

Certainly *The New Yorker's* role in the development of humorous nonfiction is tied to its role in the development of humor writing in general. Much of the writing found in *The New Yorker* and other collections of humor occupies a space between fiction and nonfiction. Mark Twain's "A Presidential Candidate" is a good example—here is the familiar Twain persona, but the wild claims he makes in this piece don't stand up in the face of a biographical inquiry. He's being facetious in more or less the same way as George S. Kaufman in "Annoy Kaufman, Inc." Neither of these works is factual, but they both occupy the gray space of the nonfiction-fiction divide. Humor writing is made up of many shades of gray, producing what could practically be considered a hybrid genre. The craft of humor, particularly the craft of self-deprecating humor, is employed in more or less the same ways by stand-up comedians, sitcom writers, memoirists, and essayists. This style of humor can be used by the full spectrum of writers from celebrity comics to creators of what might be considered "literary nonfiction"—Tina Fey, Spalding Gray, David Sedaris, Erica Jong, E. B. White, Mark Twain, and Montaigne—and all, indeed, are worth studying.

In their introduction to *Fierce Pajamas: An Anthology of Humor Writing from The New Yorker*, editors David Remnick and Henry Finder attribute the invention of a particularly *New Yorker* brand of humor to E. B. White and James Thurber (xvi). While White was a "master of the understatement" (xvi), Thurber introduced "Little Man" humor to the magazine in 1927, which played on characters' incompetence (xvi). When the narrator is crafted as "Little Man," the result is self-deprecating humor. David Sedaris is known for employing this type of humor in his stories, portraying himself, in the words of Marge Piercy and Ira Wood, as "the world's most ineffectual patsy, doormat to the world" (202). For example, in Sedaris' story,

“The Learning Curve,” (included in his collection, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*) he tells of his time leading a writing workshop, where he faced difficulty establishing authority and gaining the respect of his students:

Whenever I felt in danger of losing my authority, I would cross the room and either open or close the door. A student needed to ask permission before regulating the temperature or noise level, but I could do so whenever I liked. It was the only activity sure to remind me that I was in charge, and I took full advantage of it.

“There he goes again,” my students would whisper. “What’s up with him and that door?” (86-7)

Sedaris’ narrative voice is endearing and funny because he wears his doubts and anxieties, flaws and failures right on his sleeve. His humor functions similarly to the ubiquitous comic banana peel, relying prominently upon his consistently getting tripped up on his inadequacies and falling flat.

Remnick and Finder name “dementia praecox” humor as another of the magazine’s specialties—the ramblings of deranged or disturbed narrators (xvi). The “unreliable narrator” is an element well known to fiction writers, and the potential for humor is almost immediately apparent. When this tool is employed in nonfiction to paint the author himself as neurotic, the humor becomes charmingly self-deprecating. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “A Short Autobiography” certainly paints him as somewhat unhinged, boiling his life’s story down to a listing of alcoholic beverages by year imbibed, ending on the year the piece was written, 1929: “A feeling that all liquor has been drunk and all it can do for one has been experienced, and yet —*Garçon, un Chablis-Mouton 1902, et pour commencer, une petite carafe de vin rosé. C’est ça—merci*” (193).

In the 1930s came the “humorous reminiscence” (xvi), in whose tradition writers might look back on embarrassing experiences or shortcomings, or else may look back on everyday aspects of childhood with humor generated by approaching such remembrances from a place of greater understanding or experience. George Orwell’s “Such, Such Were the Joys...” revisits his school days, adopting a childlike point of view while ruminating on society, the educational system, and coming of age:

At five or six, like many children, I had passed through a phase of sexuality. My friends were the plumber's children up the road, and we used sometimes to play games of a vaguely erotic kind. One was called "playing at doctors," and I remember getting a faint but definitely pleasant thrill from holding a toy trumpet, which was supposed to be a stethoscope, against a little girl's belly. [...] Between roughly seven and fourteen, the whole subject seemed to me uninteresting and, when for some reason I was forced to think about it, disgusting (288).

The humorous reminiscence allows the writer to poke fun at his earlier self, and the reader gets to be in on the joke as well. Mix these three distinctly *New Yorker* styles of humor, and the result is a narrator reminiscing on his own incompetence, which is only one approach to self-deprecating humor.

Humor as Tool

Self-deprecating humor, then, relies on the exploitation of something perceivably negative about the narrator. For example, irony can be used to affect an aloof arrogance that only thinly veils self-criticism, as Nancy Franklin does in her 1997 essay, "Take it from Me." Franklin's voice is authoritative with transparently false expertise as she doles out advice based on embarrassing failures: "For example, don't wait until you're forty to have nude pictures taken of yourself" (380). Exaggeration may also be employed to expand a flaw to absurd levels. Billy Crystal's memoir, *700 Sundays*, notes, "Jews bury very quickly. Very quickly. I had an uncle who was a narcoleptic, and he'd nod off and you'd hear digging. One summer they buried him five times!" (124-5).

Self-parody is a way of magnifying the narrator in order to make fun of himself. While parody is concerned with mimicking the style of another author, self-parody seeks to exaggerate an author's own style. James Thurber is known for both styles: he parodied Salvador Dalí in his essay, "The Secret Life of James Thurber." But in "The Notebooks of James Thurber," he turns his own style on its head and

presents us with a specimen of James Thurber writing about James Thurber writing about James Thurber. The piece begins with the author's prediction that his letters will likely never be collected and published, then proceeds through his notebooks criticizing the entries as if presenting evidence to the prediction's legitimacy. Even as Thurber criticizes the contents of his notebook, his very criticisms contain the same "deterrents" for which he denounces them. He lists said deterrents as "persistent illegibility, paucity of material, triviality of content, ambiguity of meaning, facetious approach, preponderance of juvenilia, and exasperating abbreviation" (211). While illegibility and abbreviation are not relevant, the overall essay is rather facetious, making much ado out of a dearth of largely inconsequential and juvenile material. The understanding that it is just such "flaws" which have ultimately made Thurber a successful essayist makes the piece all the more tongue-in-cheek. Furthermore, the verbosity with which Thurber discusses such silly matters is characteristic of his writing.

While there are a number of reasons a writer may be drawn to the use of self-deprecating humor, the effect is still a route to the insight and truth common to nonfiction's goals. For one, picking on someone else is incredibly tricky, and the writer may find it safer to be the butt of his or her own jokes. It is notable that the majority of self-deprecating humorists—from Michel de Montaigne, to Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde, to Spalding Gray and Woody Allen, to David Sedaris—tend to be white men. These writers, immersed in privilege, have few groups to turn to for comic fodder without quickly becoming offensive. By picking on themselves, they are able to discuss sensitive issues in a way that is palatable for both those who do and do not share their privilege.

Self-hatred is both a motivation for the use of self-deprecating humor in personal narrative and a tool for finding commonality with readers. We do or say something stupid; we make a fool of ourselves; we make the same mistake again and again; we fail at something important to us; we hate the way we look; we feel defective and unworthy. For the humorist, there are lessons to be learned from such experiences. For instance, Tina Fey's *Bosypants* includes a list of body parts for which she is "grateful," of which each

entry is negative and self-deprecating: “Straight Greek eyebrows. They start at the hairline at my temple and, left unchecked, will grow straight across my face and onto yours” to “Wide-set knockers that aren’t so big but can be hoisted up once or twice a year for parades” (24). The discussion, whether in writing or aloud, of one’s flaws suggests a certain amount of fixation on those flaws, presumably in the form of self-consciousness or resentment. While the features Fey zeroes in on to make fun of herself may have been a source of insecurity for her at one time, she is clearly comfortable enough with them now to shine a spotlight on them—and not just any spotlight, but a comic spotlight. So while self-loathing may form the seed that eventually grows into self-effacing humor, the use of such humor actually suggests confidence and courage on the part of the narrator and provides comic relief in discussions of low body image and other forms of self-hate.

In the fourteenth chapter of *So You Want to Write*, Marge Piercy and Ira Wood discuss humor writing as a survival technique, identifying humorists as mostly people who perceive themselves as “losers, physical outcasts, social misfits” (197). These might include fat kids, as Piercy and Wood suggest, individuals with disabilities, minorities such as women and African Americans, homosexuals, or anyone facing anxiety or self-consciousness. The idea is to be the butt of your own joke before you become the butt of someone else’s joke. Some of the essays in David Sedaris’ *Me Talk Pretty One Day* poke fun at his high-pitched voice, lisp, and difficulty learning French, each of which made him feel alienated. Certainly, part of the process of survival includes battling that sense of alienation. After basic physiological needs, such as food and sleep, and security of body, health, resources, etc. on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs comes the sense of love and belonging. Writers, like all humans, strive for a sense of community, an assurance that they fit in or belong somewhere—it’s part of survival. Self-deprecating humor, therefore, can be used simply as a way to participate in community. This is the difference between being “laughed at” and being “laughed with.” Rather than being cast out and ridiculed, the writer becomes part of the conversation with readers who may have similar experiences.

Confession, essential to the honesty of personal narrative, is an important part of establishing the relationship of trust between writer and reader. “The spectacle of baring the naked soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist’s self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor,” writes Phillip Lopate; “some vulnerability is essential to the personal essay” (xxvi). In addition to building trust and closeness with the reader, full disclosure allows more room for jokes and sardonicism. Sedaris’ “Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist” spares none of the grotesqueries of drug addiction nor the absurdities of surrealist performance art. The rattling tale of his downward spiral is punctuated with laughs.

Hoping to get me off her back, my dealer introduced me to half a dozen hyperactive brainiacs who shared my taste for amphetamines and love of the word *manifesto*. Here, finally, was my group. The first meeting was tense, but I broke the ice by laying out a few lines of crystal and commenting on my host’s refreshing lack of furniture. His living room contained nothing but an enormous nest of human hair. [...] Other group members stored their bodily fluids in baby-food jars or wrote cryptic messages on packaged skirt steaks. Their artworks were known as “pieces,” a phrase I enthusiastically embraced. “Nice piece,” I’d say. In my eagerness to please, I accidentally complimented chipped baseboards and sacks of laundry waiting to be taken to the cleaners. (47)

Sedaris mostly skips the commentary, laying out the details of the encounter rather baldly, and this treatment provides humor enough. The setting he paints is grim but bizarre. The anecdote at the end almost catches the reader off-guard, simultaneously cementing his understanding of the narrator’s surroundings and pulling him back enough to follow the plot forward.

This type of humor draws readers in by evoking the most universal and relatable feeling: embarrassment. Embarrassing stories, such as those found in actress Aisha Tyler’s *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Heartwarming Tales of Epic Humiliation* and in the work of David Sedaris and Spalding Gray, constitute one

style of self-deprecating humor. Sedaris' "Buddy, Can You Spare a Tie?", for example, is essentially a string of embarrassing fashion faux pas ranging from his discovering glasses just like his own "on the smug plastic face of Mrs. Beasley, a middle-aged doll featured on the 1960s television program *Family Affair*" (376) to his use of such products as a prosthetic butt and a "discreet" external catheter. Such stories provide readers with fun and entertainment, while establishing a bond of trust and understanding between the reader and the narrator. In the first chapter of *The Comic Toolbox*, John Vorhaus writes, "When a clown catches a pie in the face, it's truth and pain. You feel for the poor clown all covered in custard, and you also realize that it could have been you" (Jackson). Discussing this common experience is one way for the writer to commune with his readers and experience the aforementioned sense of belonging. David Sedaris' "Big Boy" (from *Me Talk Pretty One Day*) is the excruciating story of his entering the restroom at a dinner party, where he is greeted by "the absolute biggest turd I have ever seen in my life" (97), which he cannot manage to flush. Knowing that the next person to use the bathroom will know that he was in there, he frantically tries again and again to get the thing to flush, even as someone is knocking on the door. It's funny and suspenseful because the reader can relate to the author's embarrassment. The narrator's frantic voice and mounting suspense really contribute to the humor here:

"I'll be out in a second!"

I scrambled for a plunger and used the handle to break the turd into manageable pieces, all the while thinking that it *wasn't fair*, that this was technically *not my job*. Another flush and it still wouldn't go down. *Come on, pal. Let's move it*. While waiting for the tank to refill, I thought maybe I should wash my hair. It wasn't dirty, but I needed some excuse to cover the amount of time I was spending in the bathroom. *Quick*, I thought. *Do something*. By now the other guests were probably thinking I was the type of person who uses dinner parties as an opportunity to defecate and catch up on my reading.

"Here I come. I'm just washing up" (99).

Sedaris really zeroes in on these moments in the bathroom with someone outside the door. He slows down enough to capture every ticking second, every action, every thought, and it's great for building suspense. He applies the same methodology to crafting this scene that one might expect to see in a bomb diffusing. The purpose of this—and the effect—is to maximize cringe-worthiness for the reader.

But not all uncomfortable stories—like Sedaris'—are so easily defused. Self-deprecating humor plays a particular role in crafting the narrative of misfortune or tragedy. Not only does humor aid the writer as a technique in the telling of a difficult story, it also helps the writer to avoid an air of self-pity in dealing with those subjects. Erica Jong's national bestseller, *Seducing the Demon: Writing for my Life*, cuts right to the bone, discussing Jong's romantic woes and struggles with substance abuse. She has no trouble sharing her struggles, shortcomings, or embarrassing stories, but she balances heavy subjects with self-deprecating humor to remind readers it's all in the past. In reference to her self-destructive partying days, she writes, "If it hadn't been for two physicians at the party who walked me up and down and spooned coffee down my gullet, I might be dead" (117). The situation is dire, but she crafts the scene to be morbidly laughable.

Tobias Wolff's memoir, *This Boy's Life*, is another example of this technique. The narrative follows his trans-American childhood, throughout which he travels with his mother from place to place, most often in flight of his mother's abusive boyfriends and husbands. In one scene, he attempts to explain to his brother an episode in which his step-father has hit him:

It took me a while to get the story out. The word mustard resists serious treatment, and as I described what had happened I began to fear that Geoffrey would find the episode ridiculous, so I made it sound worse than it had been.

Geoffrey listened without interrupting me. Once I was finished he said, "Let me get this straight. He hit you because of a little mustard?" (203)

Despite the gravity of the situation and the honesty with which Wolff treats it, there's a hint of sardonicism in the telling. Mocking the situation and himself, Wolff eases the reader's discomfort.

Humor and Characterization

The success of humor writing often hinges on the writer's persona on the page, rather than on jokes. Writers like Nancy Franklin and James Thurber craft themselves as characters, in part, through their use of self-deprecating humor. In autobiographical writing, as Tim Jackson observes in his article, "Laughing through Life: Humor in Autobiographical Writing," featured in *Brevity*, using characters' flaws is not only important to developing those characters but also to crafting humor. A writer of personal narrative, therefore, must be able to find the humor in his own flaws and use it in presenting his character. Tina Fey writes about the obstacles presented by her own shortcomings during the days when *30 Rock* was still in development:

A development deal means they pay you while you're thinking, which is a pretty great deal, unless you're like me and you feel constant anxiety that you haven't thought of anything yet. (My ability to turn good news into anxiety is rivaled only by my ability to turn anxiety into chin acne.) After a few months of getting money for nothing, I pitched NBC president of Primetime Development Kevin Reilly an idea about a cable news producer (me, presumably) who is forced to produce the show of a blowhard right-wing pundit (Alec Baldwin, if we could ever get him) to boost her network's sagging ratings. Kevin Reilly said, "No, thank you." All of a sudden this development deal thing didn't seem so bad. If I could get turned down one or two more times, I could keep the development money but never have to make a show. But then I'd probably also never work again, and I have a very competitive and obedient nature, so...chin acne and rewrites (153).

Here, Fey presents the problem of her anxiety and lays out its effects on her work during the development deal; even as she reconsiders, “this development deal thing didn’t seem so bad,” we see her obsessing and worrying. She compounds the problem and brings understanding to it by revealing her “competitive and obedient nature.” However, even as Piercy and Wood warn against one-dimensional characters: “[f]ocusing merely on the obsession will give you nowhere to go with your story” (210), readers see other sides of Fey’s character—her creativity and entrepreneurship, even a peek at her working relationship with NBC president of Primetime Development Kevin Reilly. Even in writing about a particular obsession or flaw, an author must present multiple aspects of his characters’ lives—and his own. Fey dodges this danger, allowing the details of her obsessive nature only to supplement the greater narrative that is her development of *30 Rock*.

When a writer casts himself as the subject of a self-portrait, the reality is that readers must see the character (a.k.a. the narrator) in action in order to fully appreciate and understand him. “It’s often how an obsessive character interacts with the world that brings us pleasure,” write Piercy and Wood (210). Phillip Lopate’s “Against Joie de Vivre,” paints Lopate as a curmudgeon, prone to discontent and hostility (716-7). Even while he criticizes hedonism, alcohol consumption, dinner parties, the present tense, and lovemaking, he takes some time in the discussion of each subject to make fun of himself. As he disparages dinner parties, their role in society, and those who attend them, dismissing the conversation as being “of a mind-numbing caliber” (722), he avoids coming off as haughty through his use of self-deprecation. First, he obviously includes himself among those on whom he passes judgment, simply because he is himself a guest at a dinner party. Second, he implies himself deficient, an outcast drowning “in an absolute torment of exclusion, too shy to speak up, or suspecting that when [he does his] contributions fail to carry the same weight as those of the others” (721). He is a type in his own analysis of the dinner party; despite the voice of idle observer, he is absolutely present in the society he critiques. Lopate notes the role of the Idler Figure as an element of the personal essay, writing, “As part of their ironic modesty, personal essayists

frequently represent themselves as loafers or retirees, inactive and tangential to the marketplace” (xxxiii), the idea being that such narrators make their observations and criticisms from the outside. But, of course, they are not on the outside; they are getting their hands necessarily dirty in the topic they are discussing. The creative nonfiction writer’s tendency to represent himself as an outsider may be another way of denying expertise and thus building credibility as an everyman.

Self-deprecating humor is especially useful in eschewing arrogance and balancing egotism, both dangers to writers of nonfiction. Writing personal nonfiction requires a certain amount of arrogance, inherent in the expectation that one’s words, thoughts, opinions, and experience be both paid attention and taken for authority – and self-deprecating humor is a way of facing that fact. Lopate writes in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* that “it takes a fair amount of ego to discourse on one’s private affairs and offer judgments about life” (xxxi). Seeing, however, that that is the express purpose of personal narrative may offer some insight into why a writer might choose the genre in the first place. The famously self-effacing E. B. White writes, “I think some people find the essay the last resort of the egoist [...] I have always been aware that I am by nature self-absorbed and egotistical; to write of myself to the extent I have done indicates too great attention to my own life” (qtd. in Lopate xxxi). As White demonstrates in this observation, a little self-deprecation can balance out an appearance of self-importance on the author’s part. Indeed, the first several paragraphs of Montaigne’s “Of Books” are rather self-effacing, as he attempts to dispel any notions that he is remotely knowledgeable on the subject he is discussing:

I have no doubt that I often happen to speak of things that are better treated by the masters of the craft, and more truthfully. This is purely the essay of my natural faculties, and not at all of the acquired ones; and whoever shall catch me in ignorance will do nothing against me, for I should hardly be answerable for my ideas to others, I who am not answerable for them to myself, or satisfied with them. Whoever is in search of knowledge, let him fish for it where it dwells; there is nothing I profess less (46).

Though very highly educated, he modestly emphasized where his knowledge was lacking, even as he informed readers on a topic, reminding readers that you really must know quite a lot in order to understand how much you don't know. His *Essays* begins with a note to the reader: "I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject" (2636). Quite often in his work, humor is generated when his modesty reaches absurdity.

Along the same lines as the self-effacing self-portrait, the "dementia praecox" focuses on building the character of the author as unhinged or unstable to comic effect. In his 1957 essay, "Annoy Kaufman, Inc.," George S. Kaufman confides his suspicion of a staggeringly powerful worldwide conspiracy to inconvenience him in a variety of ways, each more elaborate than the last:

My next example may sound like a simple and inexpensive thing to manage, but it isn't. It has to do with the engineer's little boy, Danny. Danny is six years old. In fact, he has been six years old for the thirty-five years that I have been making overnight train journeys. (I suppose that, actually, they keep on having an engineer's little boy born every year, but that takes planning.) Anyhow, for years and years Danny has been begging his father to let him run the locomotive some night. For years and years, his father has been saying no. Then, finally, the night comes. "Can I run the engine tonight, Daddy?" asks Danny, who is too young to know about "can" and "may." And his father says, "Yes, Danny, boy. We have just got word that Kaufman will be on the train tonight, and he is very tired and needs a good night's sleep, so you can run the engine." So Danny runs the engine, the result being the neck-breaking stops and starts that keep me awake all night (294).

As he presents his evidence, it becomes wilder and wilder, going even so far to cite the influence of this organization in secretly having a clause added to the original text of the income-tax law (296). Thus, it becomes more and more clear that we have an unstable narrator on our hands.

While Tina Fey's *Bossypants* certainly does not disappoint in terms of laugh-out-loud experiences, Fey's narrator is flexible enough so as to deliver in more serious realms as well, such as Fey's experiences of sexism in the workplace and her struggle to balance her career and parenthood. For example, during her pregnancy, Fey struggled with the pressure to breast-feed and her own physical and professional limitations, commenting, "If you choose not to love your baby enough to breast-feed, you can pump your milk using a breast pump. (This may be easier for the modern mom because it is an expensive appliance and we're more comfortable with those than with babies)" (218). Fey eventually switches her baby to an all-formula diet, leading to overwhelming feelings of guilt and failure, which bubble up in her daily interactions:

I was defensive and grouchy whenever the topic came up. At a party with a friend who was successfully nursing her little boy, I watched her husband produce a bottle of pumped breast milk that was the size of a Big Gulp. It was more milk than I had produced in my whole seven weeks—I blame *Entourage*. As my friend's husband fed the baby, he said offhandedly, "This stuff is liquid gold. You know it actually makes them smarter?" "Let's set a date!" I screamed. "IQ test. Five years from today. My formula baby will crush your baby!" Thankfully, my mouth was so full of cake they could not understand me (219).

While Fey provides quality laugh-out-loud humor, she does ask not to be taken too lightly. Her anecdotes and funny takes on various subjects are what draw readers in and prevent her narrator from becoming preachy, but the experiences she draws from are significant. Her introduction to *Bossypants* promises insight on finding success as a woman in a male-dominated workplace and on effective child-rearing, and she certainly does not disappoint.

To take this further, self-deprecating humor can be beneficial to writers who aim to make a statement or provide some kind of social, cultural, or political commentary. One approach is simple self-reflection; Fey's memoir is an example of this style. Montaigne's writing, on the other hand, is not so much

reflective as it is contemplative on individual subjects, contributing personal experiences to the discussion alongside formal learning. Mark Twain, whose writing is celebrated for its wry wit and self-effacing humor, wrote very controversially on a number of social and political topics. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* scorned slavery and racism, while *The Gilded Age* illuminated political corruption. He was smart about his approach to such themes, however, employing satire in many of his works and self-deprecation even more frequently.

Not all writing that incorporates humor is necessarily humor writing; the primary focus of humor writing is entertainment. But that doesn't mean it should be taken lightly. Writers like David Sedaris and E. B. White use laughter to draw their audiences in and keep them hooked, often delivering the deeper message of their writing when the reader is least expecting it. Readers know they can turn to Sedaris or White or pick up a copy of *Bosypants* for a good laugh, but that's not always what they may be looking for. Humor is used in many types of writing and is employed for a number of essential effects. Self-deprecating humor is a powerful tool for drawing readers in, avoiding arrogance and self-pity, and building character. It is a true giant in the genre, operating under diverse conditions to regularly produce successful literature.

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