
I Had A Funny Feeling

By Babe King

Romance is a warm, optimistic genre based on human emotion and relationships, so it lends itself easily to humor. Like an old-fashioned candy store, many varieties of wit are available and the best manuscripts keep you at the counter by serving several flavors.

Readers want a hero or heroine with a sense of humor. Banter, catchy one-liners and perfect comebacks are romance's stock-in-trade. Wit enlivens characters and can be infused with sexual undertones to test the waters of a new relationship or to boost sizzle in a developing one.

"...is this your usual standard of bedside manner?"

"You're not in bed."

"Is that a proposition?" He waggled his eyebrows, teasing her.

"When turkeys lay Frisbees."

"And here I thought only cows laid frisbees." From my MS "Between the Gutter and the Sky"

Though sarcasm is reputedly the lowest form of wit, it's big brother irony is much more kosher. Poetic justice. The trouble coming home to roost.

"She enjoyed the occasional women's magazine which she read with the use of a dictionary, proud to be 'effluently eruditer' than her synaptically challenged friends." From my MS "Eating Green Cheese"

I also threw a malapropism in here for good measure.

Except with Chick Lit, in romance you must be mindful of your target when you fire irony. The 'victim' should never be defenseless, and, ideally, should deserve the attack. Otherwise the reader's pity is roused and they become defensive on the character's behalf. That's NOT funny.

Same goes for mock-epic, parody and satire, though I haven't seen much of these in category romances. See "The Princess Bride" for a satirical rehash of the happily-ever-after fairytale.

Some of the best humor in romance writing is situational. A controlling character is placed in a scene where he/she is out of control, a character forced to adopt a role they are ill prepared for. Think of the movies "Three Men and a Baby", or "Raising Helen". Situational comedy can use deliberate anachronisms, as in "Kate and Leopold" where Leopold displays olde-worlde chivalry in modern New York, jumping on the back of a policeman's horse to chase the villain. Or cultural faux pas- Mick 'Crocodile' Dundee's bush friendliness in impersonal New York. Situational humor can be cultivated by involving the character's static trait. The reader knows the gag is coming because they know what the character will do. Anticipation builds the tension, making it even funnier when the reader finds they are right. In "Miss Congeniality", we just know Gracie-Lou Freebush is going to dive off the stage when she sees a man with a gun. She's not the stand-and-wait kinda girl. Any running gag gets funnier with repetition as long as it's not overdone. The rule of three applies here, each repeat upping the stakes. The first time establishes the trait, the second

establishes the pattern and the third changes/challenges the pattern yielding humor.

Situational humour may include buffoonery, clowning and slapstick, though these tend to be used with secondary characters as a reprieve from the tension of the main plot. Otherwise these acts of innocent stupidity risk devaluing the hero or heroine in the reader's eye. Shakespeare used this device in many of his comedies. Think of Bottom and Puck in "Mid Summer Night's Dream".

Double entendre, or double meaning, is the basis of many riddles and works well as a one-liner.

"The coffee's strong but the china leaves a lot to be desired." She flicked the styrene cup with a fingernail. His gray eyes smoldered for a second, then cooled at her retreat.
"Too strong for you?" From "Between the Gutter and the Sky"

In a sustained form, double entendre can create situational humor, for example, where characters talk at cross purposes. The reader enjoys the intimacy of being 'in the know' and can laugh at the ensuing misunderstanding. In "Charlie's Angels- Full Throttle", Alex is talking about her detective work with her father, but he thinks she's become a call girl.

"We just took on twelve sailors. I mean, you can't even imagine the positions we get ourselves into, Daddy. I wish you could watch us work. You'd be so proud. Now I'm going to take a shower 'cause I'm covered in oh you can only imagine what, and then I'm going to give you a full blow by blow."

By which stage the audience is rolling around in their seat.

Inclusive cliquy humour makes the reader feel special and works particularly well when the subject matter also touches the reader's life: the battle between the sexes, the struggle of raising children, having a new hair-do flop, an umbrella turning inside-out in the rain, trying to lose weight, any wistful shared experience that enables them to laugh at themselves and draws the comment, "that's so true".

"Sometimes I can't figure designers out- it's as if they flunked human anatomy." Erma Bombeck

Humor can come from an unexpected word or situation, or an unusual comparison.

"closer than an Italian's eyebrows" (thank-you Kristen)

"her mouth pursed into a cat's bum" from "Between the Gutter and the Sky"

"Three rough-looking teenage boys on skateboards wheeled along the path to the tune of a dozen swear words and numerous repetitions of the word 'wicked'. Certainly not the three wise men..." From "Between the Gutter and the Sky"

We're frequently reminded to avoid cliché in good writing, but I say harness that old horse for a new frolic around the paddock. Echoing or reworking the hackneyed expression brings a whole host of connotations

Articles

to the reader, a tantalising combination of comfortably familiar and inspiringly new. It's the basis of the whole "found art" movement. If Marcel Duchamp could elevate a used urinal to an art gallery "fountain", you can get mileage and laughs from reinventing the way your reader looks at familiar clichés.

"... was my first day E.U. (ex uterus). Funny, "ee-yoo" was exactly what my father yelled when he watched my tiny, wrinkled body being born. The midwife reached out a hand to grab me before I ricocheted from the gurney to hang by my umbilical cord like a mini astronaut going boldly where no man had gone before, only springing back to the mothership when I reached the end of my tether." From "Eating Green Cheese"

Recognize the reworked catchphrase from Star Trek?

Pun often elicits a groan and rolling of eyes, usually followed with a slow grin, especially when metafiction is used to draw attention to the maligned device.

"What?" the jack-o-lantern grumbled. "No exclamations? No, oh my gourd! Truly d'vine. I'm the cream of the crop, you know. Well, OK, I was quite seedy earlier on but I've had a clean out. Time to let my light shine."

Yep. She'd gone mad. Her mouth gaped open and remained hanging... the produce was talking to her, and it had a really lame sense of humour.

From "Halloween Cinderella"

And that's all folks, that's my gag bag for the moment. No doubt I'll remember a dozen more techniques once this is posted. I'll finish with a warning... whatever device you use, it is important to be true to your voice and writing style. Most comedians are seriously nuts- they don't call it the funny farm for nothing. You cannot "make" yourself funny. Forced humor is about as interesting as forced meat, (hamburger for you Americans). With too big a push, humor falls flat, and that's no laughing matter. groan