



Are the genres of science-fiction and fantasy incompatible with parody, satire and humor?

The question was raised recently in #scifichat on Twitter, whether the science fiction and fantasy genres were compatible with humor and satire. I have included the definitions of satire, parody and humor below.

sat·ire [sat-ahyuhr]—noun

1. *the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc.*

par·o·dy [par-uh-dee]—noun, plural -dies, verb, -died, -dy·ing.

1. *a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing: his hilarious parody of Hamlet's soliloquy.*

hu·mor [hyoo-mer or, often, yoo-]—noun

1. *a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement: the humor of a situation.*

Initially, the nature of the science fiction genre is one of exploration, so tales of satire are easily told, since sci-fi lends itself to the allegorical tale as a genre and satire is only the allegorical or metaphorical tale told large, with tongue-in-cheek, with chip on shoulder with subtlety and anger mixed, creating a world both wry and off-the-beaten path. Science-fiction based satire talks about things beyond the pale of mundane man, so if it wants to poke more fun at itself, done well, the satire enhances the work like a good seasoning does an already tasty soup.

Humor and science fiction, however, are much less compatible though they have been done by various authors over the years, notably Piers Anthony in his *Phaze Doubt* and *Xanth* series and in the realm of fantasy, few can match the wit of Terry Pratchett of the *Diskworld Series* of

novels. Few would gainsay Douglas Adams' work, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* would be that rare sci-fi fantasy that mixes successfully both satire, and humor and perhaps a bit of parody as a cherry on top. *Hitchhiker's* works as a humorous parody, since it denounces effectively the very nature of an infinite universe because at one point during the tale, we stop and eat at the *Restaurant at the Edge of the Universe*. We get to peer off into the infinite blackness and note the sign that says, "No Universe Beyond this Point."

While we dine at the Restaurant we are introduced to a [sentient being that wants to be, nay, begs to be eaten](#) and even gives recommendations on which parts of it were going to be the most smashing for dining. The series is an effective satire as well because it shows disdain of a universe, that is not only comprehensible but in some ways as bureaucratic as the world from which we ourselves hail (and is subsequently destroyed to make way for an interstellar bypass.) Douglas parodies the swashbuckling adventure space opera with the idea of the heroes making sure they are always equipped, not with the requisite ray gun, but a handy towel from which no space traveler should ever leave their Improbability-Driven starship without.

Few books can mix satire, humor and parody within a single text because of the subtle nature of these types of humor and the thinking that must go into each type of work. Parody for instance, despite its apparent rudeness is in my estimation a high sign of respect and admiration for the work being parodied. Yes, even if that parody may be rude or even disrespectful, because only in the deep knowledge of the work comes the true understanding of what is being made fun of and why it is funny.

The parody novel stands as two works of art, a reflection of the original work like the sun, and the parody itself, a lunar glow, less bright but done well, no less substantial for the effort. The parody is a high form of art, because it can be in some cases more popular than the original idea. *Bored of the Rings* by Henry Beard and *Monty Python's Holy Grail* stand as effective parodies because they are based on iconic works in the case of *Bored* (that being Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*) and the mythical quests of Arthur in the case of the Grail. These two works stand alone as strong representations of their "sun" and reflect their light both in their love and respect of the first work and the development of a "lunar" work of near equal brightness.

When asked how one should approach the art of humor in science fiction, my first thought is very carefully. Being funny is not enough. You are already asking your reader to suspend his belief in his world to be able to exist in yours. Trying to tweak his funny-bone in the process may be too much. I think great dialog is the key to the development of a keen and humorous story with the addition of over the top characters to carry an equally absurd tale. Terry Pratchett's Cohen the Barbarian is such a man.

To Quote Cohen: *What is it that a man may call the greatest things in life?" — "Hot water, good dentistry and soft lavatory paper."* — *Cohen the Barbarian in conversation with Discworld nomads (Terry Pratchett, The Light Fantastic) "*

A mighty barbarian who has had the temerity to not die in battle, he has become a wizened old man who still has the warrior spirit, aye and even the barbarian drive to impress and impale fair maidens who still fall to his charms, but he isn't quite as capable as he used to be in battle.

Humor, satire and parody are three hard elements to write in general. Timing, pacing and style greatly affect how your humor will be received, not to mention where in the world you acquired your sense of what is actually funny. Brits find most American humor to be offensive and rude, and Americans often find British humor, oblique, nonsensical or simply not funny. So if you are going to try to write a piece of work which will embody these humor elements my advice would be simple. Write for your humor sensibilities, first. See how your friends feel after they hear it, find strangers and see if they laugh. If you have the ear for humor, you will know it soon enough. If not, and you still want to write humor, keep at it, it can take a while to find your ear for keen and funny dialog. As for the subgenres of satire, humor and parody:

Satire: A dark humor; tell your tale, be sharp, be witty, see the underside of everything, snarl at the cuteness of kittens, kick helpless puppies, know that your life and the lives of the people around you are meaningless. Only then can your true brilliance in seeing the world, as it is, show through. Satire is hard, angry work; best done by critics or curmudgeons.

See: *Slaughterhouse Five* or anything by Kurt Vonnegut, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *The Time Machine*, Harry Harrison's *Stainless Steel Rat Series*

Humor: Be witty, be funny, be absurd, tell tall tales that get taller each time you tell them. Laugh at yourself and make others laugh with you. Then you will have found the secret to life. Laughing at it. You know we will never get out of it alive. And if there is an un-death, there is still humor in that, too. You get to do it all again without an escape hatch or a safety net and you will have to do it with poor hygiene, to boot.

See: *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Series*, *Red Dwarf*, *Galaxy Quest*, *Lexx*, *The Diskworld Novels*, *Xanth*, *Phase Doubt*, Robert Asprin's *Myth Series*

Parody: Have an intense love of the work you plan to parody. It will show to anyone who both knows the "sun source" and likely appreciates it as well as you do, and it shows your level of

respect for the original craftsman. Know the work, know the writer, and learn the deep meanings of that work as if it was your own.

See: *Bored of the Rings*, *Galaxy Quest*, Terry Pratchetts' *DiskWorld Novels*, *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*, any of the *Austin Powers* movies, Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*, *Men in Tights*, *Dracula*, *Dead and Loving It*.

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