

EPISODE 42:
Comedy, the Universe, and Everything

Transcribed By:
Kelly (@Read_Write_Rest)
Kelle (@cirilien_)
Millie (@themilliem)

[0:00]

M: Hello, and welcome to this episode of Be the Serpent, a podcast of extremely deep literary merit, with your classy and sophisticated hosts Alexandra Rowland, Freya Marske, and Jennifer Mace. On today's episode we're discussing [The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy](#), [The Emperor's New Groove](#), and the *Hamilton* fanfic, "[our gilded age](#)" by screamlet.

[Intro plays]

A: Hello and welcome to Episode 42: Comedy, the Universe, and Everything. I'm Alex and I am obscurely referential memes.

F: I'm Freya and I am, surprising no one, dick jokes.

M: I'm Macey and I am puns!

F: Yes, you are. We are three red-headed fantasy authors.

A: And today we're talking about comedy and things that make us laugh and things that don't make us laugh, and things that maybe...*should* make us laugh? We'll get into all of that. But before we do that, fellow Serpents, what are we reading lately?

F: Speaking of things that make us laugh, I recently read [Their Brilliant Careers](#) by Ryan O'Neill, which is extremely funny. So this is something I would not have picked up by myself. I got it off a rec from KJ Charles on Goodreads. A bit circumstantial—circumferential there. Because it's actually an Australian book. And it is a fake history of Australian literature in essentially the whole 20th century, featuring these interlocking biographies of fake literary figures.

M, giggling: Oh no.

F: Oh my goodness, it is amazing. You start off reading—and all of this stuff is quite amusing. A few jokes about the publishing industry and the literati and then you realize that they're all very, very intertwined and all these people were having affairs or they're somebody's dad or—and there's just very Australian dry humor. And there's through-lines and plots that start to appear.

It's an odd book. It's not like anything else I've read recently, but it's really, really good. I definitely recommend it. I also read [Which Witch](#), which is essentially a middle-grade fantasy book by Eva Ibbotson. Very Diana Wynne Jones-y. I hadn't read anything by Eva Ibbotson before, but I really enjoyed this. It's a very quick read about a dark fearsome sorcerer who realizes he has to get married to produce a son to inherit his dark fearsome sorcery. And essentially has a reality show competition of all the witches down in the town to work out which one he has to marry—

A: Oh. Oh, wait, wait—Is this *Which Witch*?

F: Yeah.

A: Yes, it is. I missed the title! I was, like, fiddling with my headphones. I read that book when I was fourteen and I loved it.

F: I think I would have loved it if I had read it at any age. And it's the first Eva Ibbotson I've read. I just picked it up at a secondhand bookshop ages and ages ago, because I remember vaguely hearing the name. It was lovely, I had a great time. And I have also been reading all of the [Schitt's Creek](#) fanfic by [lettered](#), who is one of my favorite writers in the [Harry Potter](#) fandom and they are now writing for *Schitt's Creek*. And I don't read a lot of fanfiction these days, but I've been thoroughly enjoying all their output in that fandom.

M: Isn't it nice when an old favorite author comes into a fandom that you're newly in and it's like, "Oh, friend!" even if they don't know you exist.

F: My inbox for the last few weeks, Alex, has been an explosion of all these people that I've had subscriptions to through AO3 suddenly writing [Good Omens](#) fanfiction.

M: Oh my god.

F: I'll wake up and, like, "Oh, another one. Oh, look, another one. Ah, someone else is writing *Good Omens* now."

M, singing: Duh-duh, dum-dum-dum, another one bite's the dust.

A: Duh-duh, dum-dum-dum.

M: Referential memes. Good.

F: Referential memes.

M: These past two weeks, I have not really been reading, because I have been doing my squirrely finest and collapsing on my carpet and staring at the ceiling for hours and scribbling

on things with funny markers and cutting them up and tying strings to pins and then stabbing things, because it's edit time.

F: She's not solving a serial killer murder, even though it sounds like she is.

M: I—it—basically that. I'm ripping my entire book to shreds and sticking it back together again, and hopefully the digestive tract will still connect.

F: That's very serial killer-y. I approve.

M: Yeah.

[M giggles]

M: I am what I am, I can't—won't apologize for it. So, because I'm editing and I'm really deep in picking apart my book, I find it really hard to read other people's books and then not get bits of their guts mixed up with my book's guts, and when I stitch it back together again, suddenly it's a Pratchett stomach. So, instead, I have been watching TV, and I have been watching a whole bunch of—and tweeting a whole bunch about—the murder-forest-mist-spooky TV show [Black Spot](#), and it's full of corvids, and I can't tell whether or not it's supernatural. I've watched, like, seven episodes of it, and it's in French, and at one point a wolf gives the main character a baby, and I'm like, "Is this normal? Does this just happen in France?" Because I'd believe you if you told me so.

A: So, sort of magical realism?

M: It's—yeah, well, it isn't, because that's a Latinx thing, but it's this weird sort of—makes you doubt yourself? Like, is it going to turn out that everyone was just popping acid? Maybe? And the secondary main character is a soft, gay forest boy whose name is Nounours, which means teddy bear.

A: Aw.

M: And he has a guinea pig that he keeps in his office at the police station, and occasionally there will just be a guinea pig in the middle of the police station.

F: So he's like a manic pixie dream policeman?

M: Yeah. He is. He has an affair with a fireman.

A: Love that.

M: And I also tumbled backwards into [Black Sails](#) fic again, because I watched two episodes of season three, which is a good season. And fell over into Flint/Silver fandom. I'm sorry.

A: Sweet.

M: It happens. Freya's, like, smugly smirking at me.

[A giggles]

A: So, my bullshit continues. I have been reading—

M: Oh, always.

A: Always, always, as you know, I am constantly on my bullshit. I have read more *Good Omens* fanfiction, of course, but I also took a brief break to watch the first season of *Schitt's Creek*, because Freya has been talking so much about it and I have heard other people say good things about it, and it was very enjoyable. I've heard that the second season gets more funny and better?

F: It does. I think the style of humor shifts a little bit. It gets a little bit less cringey and more about relying on your knowledge about the characters, and it gets more warm-hearted, I think? I think the first season was still finding its feet in terms of its emotional tone.

A: Yeah, there were still a couple moments in season one, where I really expected them to play it off as, this is funny 'cause we hate each other. And instead, they swerved away from that. Like, this family is—like, they fight all the time, but they do genuinely care about each other, and the husband and wife have each other's back and—

M: Aw.

A: Yeah, and that was surprising to me.

F: The showrunners said that they wanted to make it a show about kindness. Where kindness always wins, and people always end up taking the kind road. Which really shines through.

A: And then someone on tumblr linked me to a fanfic for the videogame [Detroit: Become Human](#), and I was not so much suplexed into the fandom as I sauntered vaguely through a corner of it. That has been my last couple days. Apparently, like, what I just want from right now, is fanfiction about people who can sort of choose their genitals according to the whimsy of the moment. Which—cool. I don't know. I don't know, man. I don't know. And then—and because I was into the fanfic, I started watching this supercut of the video game itself that someone made where they took all the cut scenes and they edited them together into this seven-hour long movie.

M: Oh god.

A: Yeah. So I'm very slowly making my way through that. Watching it, like, ten minutes at a time. And I'm nowhere close to the end, but it seems like a really cool game. Like, have you seen the sort of weird, cool stuff that CGI can do these days, because they get—

M: I have.

A: Yeah, they get the microexpressions on these characters' faces, like, so *perfect* and it looks like actual people talking and acting, instead of just, like, sort of dolls moving their mouths at each other. Really cool.

M: I do know what CGI today can do, because I too was subjected to the *Cats* trailer.

A: Oh. Well, yes.

[A cackles; M giggles]

F: I've watched it three times.

A: I think I've also watched it three times.

M: Listeners, spare yourselves.

A: I have very mixed feelings about [the *Cats* trailer](#).

M: I don't.

F: Oh, I have extremely mixed feelings, but I'm still watching it three times.

A: Oh, yeah, we're definitely watching it. Definitely. For sure.

M: No. Can't make me.

A: Yeah. So let's move on. Uh, real quick, dear listeners, if my audio is a little bit weird this week, it is because it is 84 degrees Fahrenheit, 29 degrees Celsius, outside, 76% humidity. It is currently 10pm at night where I am. So I am keeping my air conditioning on for this episode and that may affect the quality, and if it does, I'm sorry, but also I don't love you enough to turn off my air conditioning today.

M: We like our Alex to not have heatstroke.

A: Yes, we do. Yes, we do.

M: Yeah. That's a preference that I believe Freya shares with me.

A: Yes. And Alex has already had severe heat exhaustion and dehydration once in their life, so Alex has to be treated sort of with kid gloves when it comes to extremes of heat and humidity.

M: Don't leave us.

A: I know. I won't.

M: But in other news, this episode will be edited while the Serpents are on an amazing and mysterious writing retreat in Irish backcountry not far from Letterkenny, hilariously. And we will be having a house party where maybe someone will get murdered. Or maybe there will be a scandalous love affair and almost certainly there will be a seance in a cave, if we can find an appropriate cave.

A: I have been told there are appropriate caves. Like, I specifically asked, "Are there appropriate caves to have a seance?" And our darling host, "Yes, but they're tide caves, so we just have to make sure that we get out of them before the tide comes in."

M: Ooooh, so seance with bonus drowning potential.

A: Yeah! It's gonna be great!

[M giggling]

F: And I know this sounds like it was specifically planned so that we would all have an amusing chapter to put in our memoirs about that time we almost drowned during a seance in Ireland and if you are thinking that, you are possibly semi-correct.

M: Listen, that's just the kind of glamorous lives we lead, in which our shoes are full of wet sand and somebody stepped on a mussel and cut their foot.

A: Yup. So this episode will be going up after WorldCon. Presumably we have a lovely time at WorldCon. It's about three weeks away. We're looking forward to it.

M: Yep.

A: We are looking forward to being grateful to have seen you there.

M: There we go.

[A giggling]

M: That's how—how does the [FRENCH???) in plausi-pluperfect future something wiggle?

[A giggling harder]

F: Yes, well conjugated.

M: Well conjugated, thank you. This is why Alex is our designated humanities major.

A: Yes. Yes.

M: To do all the complicated verbing.

A: Let's move on with the fucking episode!

M: Let's get an episode gone, shall we?

A: Let's shall.

M: Let's shall. Freya—

F: Yes.

M: What makes something funny?

F: Oh, well this is one of those lovely questions, where the answer is possibly five essays and two books, but I think I wanted to start by recommending, to you and to all the listeners, Hannah Gadsby's Ted Talk. So Hannah Gadsby's an Australian comedian who rose to prominence in the last couple of years because of her Netflix special of her standup show [Nanette](#), and she has since then done a Ted Talk called "[Three Ideas. Three Contradiction. Or Not.](#)" And it's a very interesting 15 minutes' worth of her breaking down why *Nanette* worked as comedy and why some people complained about it not being comedy, and how she goes about crafting jokes. Specifically for standup, but the main thesis of it is that a basic rule of creating comedy is to subvert expectations. And the one way she does that is, she gives an example of setting up three ideas, and making the third one a contradiction or a subversion. So the example she gives in the talk is that she talks about, "Oh, my name is Hannah, it's a palindromic name. Everyone in my family has palindromic names." And she says, "Mum." Pause for laughter. "Dad. You know, Hannah." And then she goes, "And then, of course, my brother Kayak."

[M laughs]

F: And that's—and it's part of the same joke, and you laughed a little bit at the first two, because they're like, "Haha, Mom and Dad aren't proper names," and then she just completely turns around and is like, "Here's something ridiculous!"

M: Yisss.

F: And so she used that as the basis to explain how you can structure jokes in standup comedy using that. But a lot of what she talks about are the very basics of what makes something comedy versus not comedy. Definitely worth checking out.

M: I think that's a really good point about you—laughter is about surprise, right?

A: Yeah.

M: And there are lots of different ways to do it, and we'll be talking about that in some of our tentpoles, but it's about something unexpected or just a little off-kilter. And the ways that you catch a lot of people with the same surprise, I think, is part of the thing that makes comedy the hardest part—for me, at least—of fiction. Like, to craft something funny, that is funny for the majority of people consuming it? That's really hard to do.

F: Hm, 'cause you want to rely on something shared—

M: Mm-hm.

F: But at the same time, if you rely too much on people's assumptions, then they'll see the punchline coming.

M: Yeah! Or they'll feel left out, because only a small subsection of people will have that shared experience.

A: Yes.

M: But shall we continue?

A: Yes. So speaking of things being just a little bit off-kilter, this is episode 42. I have been swearing up and down since somewhere in the 20s that for episode 42 we absolutely, absolutely had to tentpole *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. And finally we are, because it is here! *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is probably one of the more famous comedy books, especially comedy scifi. If you, by some weird coincidence, you have not seen it or listened to the radio show or read the book—

M: Or watched the movie.

A: Watched the movie, read the book. It has been adapted in multiple ways. It originally was a radio show—I think it started airing in the 80s—about a man from a little town in England, Arthur Dent, who wakes up one morning to find out that his house is going to be knocked down to make way for a bypass. A freeway for you Americans.

M: Yup.

[15:10]

A: So he lies down in front of the bulldozer, until his friend, Ford Prefect—who is named after a car, because he is an alien from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse—comes along and tells him that the world is about to end in 15 minutes. Because the earth is about to get destroyed to make way for an interstellar bypass.

[M laughs]

A: And, uh, it's a classic of science fiction, and everyone classifies it as a comedy, and the first time when I read it, when I was 14, I didn't particularly laugh about it. And when I was re-reading it this week, I also didn't particularly laugh about it. So like, it's clever, but I don't know that I, personally, would go so far as to classify it as funny, because I'm not actively laughing at it.

F: Whereas I *would*, and it's because of the context in which I came across it first.

A: Yeah.

F: I was read this book aloud by my mother, when I was probably around, oooh, maybe 9, I think? And my brother, I have this very vivid memory, my brother had one of those car beds—

A: Yeah.

M: Mmmm.

F: —of my mum reading books to us while we would both go and sit in my brother's car bed. And she read us [The Hobbit](#) that way, and she definitely read us *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. And I remember laughing so hard, like she had to keep pausing while we laughed. Because, for children, who had never come across this kind of comedy before, and I think, watching us laugh at this was that my parents realised they could start watching things like [Blackadder](#) and [Absolutely Fabulous](#) with us. Because that was the kind of humor that our family sort of bonded around. But I—it stands out so clearly, there are some lines that I can still remember—

M: Mmmhmm

F: —hitting me for the first time. Like there is like that says, “Ford, you’re turning into a penguin, stop it!”

[M + A laugh]

F: Which to a child, is so fucking hilarious.

M: Yes! I still, like, the thoughts that go through that poor fucking sperm whale’s head as he’s falling.

A: Yes.

F: That’s pathos humor, because you’re like “oooh, the sperm whale”

M, laughing: Oooh no. Because at one point, one of the core concepts of this book is that one of the other main characters has stolen a spaceship that operates on the infinite improbability drive, that manages to yeet itself from one part of the universe to another by means of making it deeply improbable that it wasn’t already there. Kind of.

A: See, that explanation of it is also very funny.

[All laugh]

F: A lot of the concepts in it are.

M: Yes! But one of the consequences is that a vast amount of deeply improbable bullshit happens around it any time this drive gets turned on. Including missiles turning into a doomed sperm whale and a bowl of petunias, who then plummet towards a planet. And the bowl of petunias only thought is, “Not again.”

[A laughs]

F: And if humor comes from surprising you with something you weren’t expecting, the first time you read this, basically page by page by page something is happening that you’re not expecting. But it has a few different types of humor in it.

M: It definitely does. I think for me, absurdist humor is a fine line to walk, because if they just throw complete bullshit on the page for absolutely no reason, that never connects back, after a while you’re just like, where is the payoff? And I find that Douglas Adams pushes that line pretty hard.

F: Mmm, I would agree. I think a lot of the humor comes line by line—

M: Mmmhmm!

F: —rather than setting up a long payoff. And actually, I have to tell you this story, so when I was reading through my very old Pan paperback copy of *Hitchhiker's Guide*, for this episode, I hit page where I was like, oh okay, there are three different types of jokes, all on this page. This is a great example, I'd better bookmark it. And I realized it was page 42.

M: Ooooooh!

F: Which I thought was very apt.

[A laughs]

F: So the three jokes are, the one where Ford is thinking that if human beings don't keep exercising their lips, he thought, their brains start working. And that's part of a paragraph about observational kind of dark humor about humans being the worst.

[A laughs]

M: Mmm.

F: And then there's a sort of set up call and response joke, which is, "How do you feel?" "Like a military academy, bits of me keep on passing out."

[M laughs]

F: Which is very much a completely different—It's almost like a knock-knock joke.

A: Yeah.

M: Right.

F: And then, nearer down the page, we get much more of that kind of like, sarcastic, what I think of as Ben Elton-y kind of humor where Ford says "We're safe," and then he goes on to say

"We're in a small galley cabin in one of the spaceships of the Vogon Constructor Fleet."

"Ah," said Arthur. " this is obviously some strange usage of the word *safe* that I wasn't previously aware of."

[M giggles]

M: Which is—

F: And that, that's TV dialogue humor. You can imagine that being said in a comedy.

M: The thing is, that's such British bullshit.

F: Yes.

M: And the thing is, I could hear my father saying something like that, just to be a pain in the ass.

F: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, my parents as well. And that's what I meant when I thought about the reason this kind of humor resonates so hard for me, is because it's the sense of humor that my parents share. And so it's the sense of humor that my siblings and I share, and we grew up reading this, watching British comedy shows that share this kind of humor somewhere on their family tree.

A: And I was going to say, I think that the reason—Macey mentioned how Douglas Adams is really pushing the line of where surrealist humor stops being funny, and where the payoff is. And I think that one of the reasons why *Hitchhiker's Guide* originally worked so well, was because of the structure of the radio show, where you were taking it weekly—

M: Mmmm.

A: —In like 20 minute bursts. So, I think that generally, you would have a higher tolerance for the surreal stuff. Rather than when you sit down to read the book, like you read a big chunk of it all at once.

M: That makes sense.

F: Yeah, and I would be interested to see where they made the divisions for the radio show. Like, does each episode have a sort of arc, as a set piece. Is there one chunk of thing that happens that's quite funny, Because when you reading it straight through as a book, it's quite difficult to tell.

A: Yeah I listened to several episodes of the radio show, in addition to the book, because I had never listened to it before, and I wanted to see what was different. The radio show leaves out—naturally, which makes a whole lot of sense—or rather, the book adds things in, because the radio show came first. So, a lot of the narrative bits and description. For example, in that first chapter, the bit about the supervisor at the construction site, about how he is a very very direct male line descendant of Genghis Khan—

F: Yes.

A: —that is not in the radio show. And it's a great paragraph, I think it's a great addition to the book, so it was definitely beefed out a little bit. But also because of the structure of the form, it has to be a little bit more sleek, and a little bit more streamlined. And it does kind of go in chunks. But let's move on to the next tentpole, Freya.

M: Freeeya.

F: Yes, the next tentpole is this week's fanfic tentpole.

M: Yeeees.

F: And this is a duet of fics, the series is called "our gilded age" by screamlet. And it is *Hamilton* modern day politics AU-ish. Given that they are politicians, it's not really AU but the conceit is that the modern day American government more or less, is the people from the Founding Fathers' time of government, but basing the characterization on how they appear in the *Hamilton* musical, with a few, sort of, modern spins.

A: Yes.

[22:46]

F: This is something that I discovered... I can't remember how long ago now, but I re-read it very frequently, they're both very short, they're snappy, they are very funny, and I enjoy the hell out of them. What did you think of them?

A: I—yes. I think you were the person who originally linked me to this one, and this is definitely something that I laugh aloud at, because it kind of has that situational humor, it has characterization dialed up to 11, it has that sort of overdramatic *Hamilton* screaming at people, amusing choices of dialogue tags...

F: Yes. Dialogue tags can go so far towards humor.

A: Yes.

F: But also the structure, like showing emails or text exchanges.

A: Mmhmm, the group chat.

F: Those are some of the funniest text message exchanges I have ever seen.

A: Mmhmm, yup.

M: This didn't really land for me, I have to say.

A: Totally fair, because like—and I think that that’s a really good point too, because not every kind of comedy is going to be for everybody. So, do you want to talk about—

M: Yeah, for me it didn’t have... It didn’t flesh anything out enough for me to care about any of them.

A: Sure, it was just, sort of, jokes.

M: It was just punchlines.

A: Okay.

M: And I think that maybe a lot of the punchlines were, like, beefed out if you had more of the references.

A: Mmmm.

M: But I found it, kind of, too off the cuff. It felt a little bit like those weirdly exaggerated teen movies of, like, teenagers in highschool being snappy.

A: Mmm, sure.

M: Like [Buffy](#) comebacks.

A: Sure sure.

F: That’s true, I think a lot of—see for me I quite enjoyed that over-structured almost like wearing its fakeness on its sleeve dialogue, that you get in certain types of humor. And I put in our document that nobody ever actually talks like this, meaning that the kind of back and forths that you see there are what you see in very well structured and well written comedy, where nobody is actually that smart, and nobody has that off the cuff esprit de l’escalier in real life.

M: It’s like [West Wing](#), it’s very like *West Wing* dialogue.

F: Yes.

A: Yeah.

M: Right? And nobody would ever successfully carry off this fifteen-part bant—witty bant—I’m trying to say [slowly] “witty banter”, but I keep saying “banty” in my head instead, so that’s how my day is going.

F: Bitty wanter, which is a spoonerism.

M, laughing: Bitty wanter.

F: And spoonerisms are a whole different type of humor.

M: Oh I fucking love spoonerisms. Ahhh.

A: It's related to puns—

M: So much fun.

A: —you know, sort of toying with words sort of humor.

F: Yeah.

A: I don't think that there was a lot of toying with words in this fic and that sort of your...

M: Yeah, I think that we all have slightly different tastes when it comes to humor, and I think that that's something that is super specific to people, and so really successful, funny things have a wide spread—

A: Yep.

M: —right, and they manage to catch people.

F: But, I think that leads a little bit well to the next tentpole, because—

M: Mmmhmm.

F: —because the next tentpole is something in a genre of things that are trying to be funny on a few different levels at once.

M: Yes!

F: Which is animated films, aimed nominally at children, that are also family films because they're trying to be funny for the adults as well.

M: Yes, so the next tentpole that we're talking about is *The Emperor's New Groove*, which is a Disney movie about an Incan emperor, who is kind of a selfish twat, who gets himself turned into a llama. Aaaand—

F: Comedy gold.

A: Yep.

M: —tries not be a llama any more, while still being a selfish twat.

A: He has to discover the power of friendship and also... how to be ethical.

F: Yeah.

M: How to be ethical, it's basically Kadou.

A: Well, it's like Kadou's worst nightmare.

M, cackling: Yeah, that's fair.

A: Kadou fucking hates this film. Also, another film that Kadou hates, [*The Lion King*](#).

M: That's fair. So, the great thing for me about this film, there are a lot of fun lines in this film, but I have a deep abiding affection for some of the physical and choreographed humor. There is a scene in which the peasant who is helping the emperor back to the main city, falls through a rope bridge and gets tangled up in the rope bridge, and the emperor—still a llama—is like “niyner niyner, I'm leaving you there, and I'm going to go off on my own, I tricked you into thinking I was a good person, haha.” And then *a/so* falls through and gets tangled up in the ropes. And they proceed to have a fist fight while dangling from a rope bridge above a canyon, and bouncing back and forth—

A: Some good slapstick.

M: —being absolute idiots, and then the bridge collapses.

A: It's some real good slapstick.

M: I'm like, you deserved that!

A: Yep.

M: I just... it was so much fun.

A: Yes. It is a really fun film. And like, it has some great animation to, like it does that—the wonderful thing about animation is being able to over-exaggerate the actions, right?.

M: Yes.

A: I think that *Emperor's New Groove* has some really really wonderful examples of that used effectively.

F: It's because it's so stylized.

A+M, together: Yes.

F: Like, the character designs in and of themselves are funny.

M: Yes! And the llama is fucking hilarious, just as a thing, being on your screen. This is a llama.

A: Yep.

F: Yeah, and it really pushes the envelope in terms of how much comedy can we wring from the whole concept of being turned into an animal. And they do it even later on, when they have the guards just randomly turned into a whole group of random animals, and like, one of them is a whale, and one of them is saying "I've been turned into a cow, may I be excused?"

[A laughs]

M, laughing: And they're like "yes, anyone else?" And everyone else is like, "Nah, I'm fine being an octopus, actually. This is good."

A: We're good.

M: Another of my favorite scenes was, all four of the main characters: the emperor, and the peasant, and the advisor who turned the emperor into a llama in the first place, and her bodyguard, Kronk, end up in a diner together.

A: Oh, yes! Yes!

F: Oh, yes, the whole diner scene.

M: And the llama has dressed as a very ugly woman because the diner is strictly no llamas, and he's hungry.

[A laughs]

M: And he's pretending to be the peasant's wife. And there is this extended gag where the llama and the advisor are on either side of a swinging door going in and out of the kitchen, trying to order food, like right after one another.

A: Yep.

M: And keep nearly getting spotted.

A: And that is really funny because of the tension—

M: Yes!

A: —because at that point in the film, because like, oh no oh no, is she going to discover Kuzco, the emperor who's been turned into a llama. 'Cause she wants to kill him, right?

M: Yeah, she wants to kill him.

A: And so it's it's funny because you have this tension between what's going on, but also the awareness of what the stakes are.

M: Yep. And what's going on is so silly.

A: Yeah it's so silly.

F: Yep. And again, later in the film you have where Yzma and Kronk go and visit Pacha the peasant's family.

M: Mmmhmm.

F: And again, there's this sense of menace, because you know that they are up to no good, and they mean them ill. But they're pretending to be random relatives...

[M laughs]

F: ... who are just there to have tea. So then you have this extended comedy sequence, where this very pregnant unimpressed wife, and these two tiny children manage to outsmart the advisor and lock them in a room, and like roll them down a hill. And again, it's all visual gags, that works because there's been this tension built up in the scene that's suddenly breaking.

A: Yep.

F: Yep.

M: And I think that this is one of my favorite types of comedy involves some of this—humor in visual media can make use of body language and facial expressions, and it can make use, you know, of audio. So there's the delivery and the timing and the tone of voice.

A: Mmmhmm.

[30:21]

M: And how do we do that in written form?

A: So, part of what you can do is literally just formatting it on the page, because you do have a tendency to take a nanosecond break at the end of a paragraph. So if you want to set off a punchline, you just put it on a new line. It sounds kind of clunky, but literally that is a thing you can do.

M: But I feel like I've seen some people do this really well and I want to say that Cassie—A.K. Larkwood, whose book's coming out in February, [The Unspoken Name](#), I think?

A: Yep.

M: It has some really cool things around describing facial expressions that are just fucking hilarious because you can see which characters know things and are looking and seeing things and which characters aren't, and the narration—the narrative voice is giving you the camera's-eye-view that the character who really needs that information doesn't have. So that tension makes it really funny.

F That's good. I'm trying to think of any examples I have where someone has managed to describe facial expressions such that you get visual humor. I think Pratchett does it quite well in some cases. He has a knack for sort of capturing how someone looks. Not necessarily by describing the micro expression but by making a slightly off-beat comparator that makes you think, "Yes. I have the movie of this going in my head." And it's adding to the wordplay that's already taking place.

M: Yup. Yup.

F: Yeah.

M: Particularly body language, I feel with Pratchett. People being slumped, tired and done.

F: Yeah. I think that's right. Because he has the body language stuff and the words, but he misses that third arch which is the audio where you have the delivery and the voices, and things like that. And I was thinking about what you said about radio plays, Alex. My favorite example of a comic radio play is one where basically—the writing is very funny, but I'd say the majority of the humor is in the delivery. That's [Cabin Pressure](#).

A: I love that radio show. So good.

F: It's a very, very funny radio drama starring Benedict Cumberbatch in one of the main roles—if you don't think Benedict Cumberbatch can be funny, you should listen to this because he absolutely can—about a very small charter airline and the semi-incompetent, hilarious people who run it.

A: An 'airdot'. And *airdot*, Freya, because they only have one plane. Not an airline.

F: Yes... a... it's an airline. It's an airdot.

M: [lit. 'hohohohos like she's a high school anime villain']

F: So there's again, a lot of word play in the dialogue. It's very cleverly written and all the episodes work very tightly as set pieces of humor, but so much of it comes from the buildup of running gags and getting to know the characters and knowing how they fit together and what's funny to them. But also, just the delivery. Like, Roger Ailes has this very dry, superbly nonchalant, sarcastic delivery of his lines that are just hilarious in and of themselves.

A: Great use of timing, too.

F: Yes.

A: I forget what episode it is—it's one of the early ones—but there's this running gag about having to land on this airstrip but they can't unless there's an emergency and the two pilots have been fighting the whole time about whether Robert Ailes character will be allowed to do the dangerous thing—

F: —I think I've actually gotten his name wrong. I think... Robert Ailes is that fucking Fox News guy. Hang on. It's Roger someone. Roger Allam.

A: Roger Allam. That's right.

F: I knew it was Roger A and for some reason—because I've been reading too much of the news, I was like Roger Ailes! No. No. That's not who it was.

A: No, no. Roger Allam. Yes.

F: Roger Allam.

A: And at the end of the episode—like, the whole time he's been wanting to do dangerous things, to cut corners, and Benedict Cumberbatch's character has been very by the book and at the end of the episode they're in kind of a tight spot and Roger Allam's character just, like, flicks a match, and says, "Do you smell smoke in the flight deck?"

[suppressed giggles]

F: It's true! Timing is one thing that's really hard to capture on a page, and I agree that making a new line for something has the effect of giving a beat.

A: Yes.

F: And beats in comedy are very important. But I'm not quite sure how else you can replicate that in text form.

A: So, I know—when we're talking about beats in comedy, there's also kind of conversational beats as well. This is something that I sometimes have trouble with in social situations, like bar-con, but Macey's kind of like the bar-con expert. So I'm wondering if you have any insights or thoughts about this.

M: Yeah! So, I think that there's—this is talking a little bit about the difference between writing and creating comedy and being funny. Right? And when we're talking about being funny, particularly in groups of people, there's a thing that you learn to do when you're trying to do it on purpose and you have something funny to say where you gather attention, then pause, and then say the punchline in a particular tone that can fairly reliably make people laugh, even at really stupid puns. But it's all about kind of this...oh! Everyone's breath is held because we have kind of signaled that something is about to happen—and then it's 'on a hot *tin* roof', and that's a reference and that's funny because I recognized it and hahahaha.

A: And it's the release of tension as well, right?

[35:44]

M: It's exactly that, and that one's very learnable. And there's a lot of ways of being in social groups that are a lot more learnable than people think.

A: Mm-hmm

M: But, I had fun, like, experimenting with that one over a long period of time.

F: And you can tell people who have learned it very, very well, because very good stand-up comics have that immense grasp of when their audience is going to pause and how they can bring their audience with them—when they can hold a beat, how long they can hold a beat, and what kind of tone of delivery is going to make that joke land.

M: Exactly that. And the person who, for me, does this best in written form is Connie Willis—at least in the book of hers that we have spoken about, [To Say Nothing of the Dog](#)—has this gift of building up tension and ratcheting it up and you see the thing is about to happen and then it just

pauses. And then does it happen or not? The event, the . . . are they going to find the cat? Is this person going to meet that person in a terrible way? Like, that anticipation that the audience has, that's kind of held and suspended and grown and grown and grown . . . she is really very good at pushing it, but not so far that you forget why it's funny.

A: Yes.

F: Hmm, I agree. She's very good at extending those things past where you think they're going to work.

M: I want her skill. [laughs briefly] And it reminded me of the gag from [*Rocky Horror Picture Show*](#)

A: Oh, yes, oh yes.

M: Antici. . . pation.

A: You could've paused longer there.

[F laughs]

M: I could've, but I didn't want to—

A: —Could've drawn that out—

M: —to push it.

[Laughter]

A: And beats are something. . . I'm going to draw back the curtain a little bit here, we might draw back the curtain a little bit later on, but since we're talking about beats here I just want to mention it. When I'm editing the audio of an episode, a lot of times I will tweak when someone says something, because sometimes an extra second of pause, or taking a couple of seconds of pause away, makes a certain interaction more funny. Like, it's very funny to us in the moment, because we're the ones involved in it, but when you listen to it—

M: —Because we're nerds.

A, somewhat simultaneously: —'Cause we're nerds, but when you listen to it afterwards you want to really have the beats, right, to make up for the fact that you're not actually involved at that moment.

F: Yeah, and I think people who are very good at improvisational humor are the ones who learn to internalize that to the point of being able to replicate it in real time.

A: Mm-hmm!

M+A: Yes

M: And improv, people who do improv are super cool.

F: I admire them, but it is not for me.

A: Nooo, no, not for me either.

M: If you ever get John Chu in a con, he will tell you all about improv and it's great.

A: Also Marty Cahill.

M: But one of my favorite types of humor, and you see this a ton in British writers, is wordplay humor.

A: Why do you like puns so much, Macey?

M: I like—they feel like a game, right?

A: Okay.

M: It's very quick response, connection, and you can riff off other people with this, it's very like community—like social bonding.

A: Mm-hmm, that's true.

F: Whereas I like planned euphemism. So, obviously we made a joke about me and my dick jokes, and the Hamilton fic that I wrote that had thirty five dick jokes in it.

A: Ha! Yes.

F: That's less because I have the sense of humor of a five year old, but you know, occasionally one does—

[A makes skeptical vaguely whinney-like sounds]

F: —And more because I love that satisfaction of double meaning

A: Yes

F: —And being able to play with multiple meanings of a word in a way that makes something funny.

M: Yes! I love that. And there's this satisfaction of decoding a riddle when you get a joke that is like that.

A+F: Yes.

M: Just makes you feel that little buzz of Ooooh!

A: Yes, and sort of like when you have those multi-tiered memes, where there's three memes in one image and you have to—

M:—three memes in a trenchcoat?

A:—Three memes in a trenchcoat, right—

F:-Yes

A:—And you have to have awareness of all of the memes and then sort of put them together to make one super meme.

F: Mmm

M: Fucking loss!

A: Fuckin' loss, exactly!

M: Loss is the worst!

F, somewhat simultaneously: Loss is the worst, oh my gosh.

F: And I know we've talked a lot about Terry Pratchett throughout this because I think the Discworld series is just this perfect encapsulation of the use of humor. There's one joke—every time I read the Discworld books, I find new wordplay that I hadn't recognized, either because I hadn't read, or experienced, or had the cultural reference to recognize it, or just because it had passed me by. And we were talking about written word versus spoken word—

A: Mm-hmm

F: So, Mark Oshiro, who does the [Mark Reads](#) videos, is doing the whole Discworld series at the moment—

A:—Oh boy.

F:—He's up to [Unseen Academicals](#), he's getting quite far through, and there's a word joke in there that I had never realised in my re-reads of this book and I only realized it because when he spoke it aloud I could hear it, and then he paused, and laughed about it, 'cause he recognized it speaking it aloud, and it's when the two characters, the two girls, are on a tram and one of them is saying, you know, you should learn to speak better, because people will take you more seriously or you might get better jobs or whatever and they get stopped by the conductor, who says my *fair* lady.

[M laughs]

A: Ooooh

[M is still snickering]

F:—And it's because they're having a conversation about learning to speak better—

A+M [Alternating like cartoon frogs]: Yep, yep, yep, yep.

F:—to get a better job, and then the next line is—

M:—And so the Pygmalion joke

F:—my fair lady. Yeah, well it's a [My Fair Lady](#) joke, and it was something I had never actually picked up, because in the text it says my fare, F-A-R-E, comma, lady,—

A:—Right

F:—And it's in context because they're on a tram.

A: But when you read it out loud, yeah.

F: And his books, I think, are full of those kinds of word plays, some of which I think I haven't picked up and won't pick up until my tenth or eleventh reading.

M: And see, that's great! Because that's completely not a joke unless you happen to have the context of a particular—not that obscure—British play, musical, and connect it with the situation and these characters. And I like that!

F: Yeah, it's not, it's not exclusionary at all.

M: Yes, exactly.

F: Because it just comes across as a normal line, unless you have the secret knowledge.

M: And I think that's super important in order to not make the people unwelcome who don't get that particular form of humor, right, I think that's how you—

F: Yeah.

M:—Make it feel accessible. Because, like, I never feel stupid reading a Pratchett book and getting something I didn't get last time. That never makes me feel like I was dumb last time I read it, you know?

A: It makes you feel like you're more clever now.

M: Right, because you don't feel like he'd be judging you for not getting it the first time.

F: Mmm

A: Yeah

M: You're not meant to get everything.

F: And also, he hasn't paused for laughter.

M: Right!

F There's no gap saying you should laugh now, this was a joke.

M: Right, which is, again, very British—

F: Mmm

M: —As opposed to American.

A: Yes.

M: The laughter kills me, I cannot deal with it.

A: No, I can't either, it gets. . . That's one thing about sitcoms, like your classic sitcoms that has always alienated me. Because they're laughing at either something that I don't really think is funny, or something that is actively cruel and mean, and—

M: But even when they are better than that, like even with like. . . I really enjoy [Jane the Virgin](#) sometimes—

A: Mm-hmm

M:—Because it's a sitcom that never. . .it isn't cruel, and I'm imagining from how you two are speaking about Schitt's Creek that that's kind of a similar thing there, but even so, laugh tracks still kind of frustrate me a little bit, because I'm like, I know it's funny, you don't have to give me this thing.

A+F: Yeah

F: The only sitcom with a laugh track that I watch regularly is [One Day at a Time](#), and I think I've just learned to live with the laugh track because of the kind of jokes the show makes. It's very much progressive humor, never punching down—

A: Mmmmm, mmhmm

F: —Sort of laughing at power in a way that's trying to defuse a very dark situation, and so the laugh track almost feels like warmth. It's like there's a lot of people who are on the same side as the characters—

M: Okay.

F:—Finding the same things funny that they find. And it never feels like they are being laughed at, even when they're sort of slightly being laughed at a little bit.

M: Yeah, yeah, that makes sense.

[43:50]

A: So what other books or stories have you found funniest?

M: So, I want to talk about [In Other Lands](#)—

A: Oh! Yes please.

[M giggles]

M: 'Cause we like that—

A: We did like it, we love that book.

F: Yes, we do.

M: It's so much fun! And it's so fucking hilarious. And—

F: This is by Sarah Rees Brennan—

M: Yes, this is by [*Their Brilliant Careers*](#) by Ryan O'Neill

F: —Who's a very funny writer.

[M giggles]

M: And it's funny on multiple different levels. One of those levels is that the main character is a sarcastic little brat.

A: Didn't we tentpole this for Disaster Bisexuals?

M: We did, yes.

A: Yes, that's what I thought.

M: And so you have a character who is legitimately witty and cutting and funny, just as a person. If you interacted with him in life you'd think he was annoying, but also clever and funny, probably.

A: Yep.

M: Or just want to kick him. But also she sets up situations that are really funny, like the—

F: The fucking unicorn.

M:—Matriarchal elves. Oh, yeah! Oh, god.

[A chuckles, F laughs]

F: The entire unicorn gag is so good. Ooooh yeah.

A: Yes.

F: Yep

M: That was, like, the obsessed with purity thing.

F: Yes! Where they're all out on like a field trip and there's one member of this high school class who has not yet had sex—

[M laughing in the background]

F—And he's so annoyed that everyone's like you go deal with the unicorn. He's like, shut up! Shut up, all of you, I don't want to hear it, stop!

[M still laughing]

A: It was very good.

F: And everyone's like, everyone's like, but you're so hot, why didn't you. . . Stop talking to me!

[Assorted laughter]

F, quietly: Good shit, good shit.

M: And I was thinking all the stuff with the matriarchal elves, which is so fucking funny to us because it's a pure toxich patriarchy, just flipped onto women—

A: Yep.

M: And it's hilarious, and all of their delicate, makeuply boys who couldn't possibly be asked to hold a weapon in their soft hands.

[A chuckles]

A: Yeah, 'cause it's a total subversion of expectations.

M: Right—

A: Yeah.

M: And it's also a little bit mean about it—

A: —It's a little bit mean.

M: Not mean in a nasty way, but it's very clear that Rees Brennan does not like these things that she's skewering.

A: Yeah, it has an edge to it—

F: Oh yeah, it's absolutely direct satire.

A: Yep.

M: Yeah, it has an edge to it. And that, I think, heightens humor a lot. One of my favorite TV humor things growing up was [M*A*S*H](#), which, I don't know if either of you have ever watched M*A*S*H?

F: No.

M: It's really dark, it's a TV show about the Vietnam War. It's also really old, and it's black humor, and humor at the very cutting edge of despair, because if you don't laugh you'll just break down.

A: Mmmhmm

M: And it's hilarious! But it's dangerous, at the same time.

A: Yeah.

M: You know?

F+A: Yeah.

M: And that just makes it funnier.

A: Yeah!

F: Yeah, and that's how the British deal with war—

M: Yes!

F:—Essentially, like the—

M: Oh yes!

F: —Blackadder, [Blackadder Goes Forth](#), the World War I season, is extremely dark and has a lot of very sharp things to say about the way World War I—

M: Oh yeah.

F:—Happened, and was run and all sorts of things like that. But it's very, very funny. But yeah, *Blackadder's* an interesting one, it's got a very different tone across all of its seasons.

F: It's coming at things from slightly different perspectives.

M: Whereas if you're going back to the, um, *holy grail* of British comedy shows—

[soft laughter]

M: We have to talk Monty Python

A: Oh, absolutely.

M: Which is the absurdist foundation of Douglas Adams. [Wibbly noises of working on starting a sentence] The sketch of the parrot that's pining for the fjords, it's not dead—

[F chuckles]

A:—It's an ex-parrot

M: Why is this funny?

[Laughter]

F: Yeah, well, in terms of things that have made me laugh the hardest, I think as a kid, as well as *Hitchhiker's Guide*, speaking of sort of funny. . . internal narrations and narrators who are annoying, sarcastic little shits—

M: Yes.

F: I remember sitting in my school library laughing hysterically at a series of books by an Australian writer called Catherine Jinks, and it's called the [*Pagan series*](#)—

A: Mm-hmm

F: It's historical fiction set at the time of the crusades about a young Arab Christian boy in and around Jerusalem who becomes attached to the Templar Knights—

A: Mmmm

F: Catherine Jinks is a historical academic, she's clearly done a lot of research on this time and there's a lot of very sharp period detail, but the narrator is so funny, and the things that he observes about the people around him, and the way he expresses it, is absolutely hilarious. I love these books, I still reread them now, and as I grow up I think I have preferred that kind of narration-based—

A: Mmm, mm-hmm

F: —Humor. But, I also think funny dialogue can be really, really good. Georgette Heyer I think has some amazingly funny dialogue, and I have grown more and more appreciative of the hilarious set piece, and I think *In Other Lands* has quite a lot of funny set pieces. But the hardest I have ever laughed at a book is at a couple of the set pieces in Dorothy Dunnett's [Lymond series](#). Which are not light-hearted books at all, but because she has such a deft hand with emotion and tension, there are a couple of scenes in them that are extremely funny, and they are funny because the characters in them are finding them funny.

A+M: Mm-hmm

F: Like, they are aware of the absurdity of their situation, and they're surrounded by people who aren't seeing the absurdity. And she describes them trying not to laugh—

A: Mmmhmm

[M giggles]

F: While also describing, with perfect word choice, exactly how absurd the situation is, to the extent that I think I, like, put down the book and hurt my stomach—

[M+A giggle]

F:—Before I could pick it back up again, and I had not expected that in the middle of something as serious as a Lymond book.

A: Yeah. Yeah.

M: You're reminding me of the Vorkosigan [Civil Campaign](#)—

A: —Ooh, yes!

F: —Yes!

M:—And the fucking dinner party.

F: Yep, similar thing.

M: That fucking dinner party.

A: That dinner party, though.

[M giggles in a gurgling kind of way]

F: I love a set piece.

A: I think that, of the media I consume, probably the most consistently funny thing is fanfiction, because you have. . . again, we always come back to this, that shared knowledge between the author and the audience, so you can do funny things by just having a line that relies on all of the. . .like, the set up for the joke is everything that you know about this character, right?

F: Mmm

A: And like, you know this character so well and then there's this one line, which is either so perfectly them that it's hilarious or that goes against expectations in a certain way. And right now the Good Omens fandom, by the way, is doing a fantastic job of this, just want to say. But can we talk a little bit about—more about—writing humor and what goes into it?

F: So, I have written funny things that are deliberately funny, mostly in the fanfic world, I would say. But also, my first novel, there were some parts of it that I tried to make deliberately funny, mostly through having a character that was quite funny. Whereas in the book I'm writing at the moment I'm trying my hand at seeing if I can create a couple of funny set pieces, like the ones that I admire in Dunnett—

A: Yeah.

F: And—

M: Fish market!

F: There is—

A: —The fish market scene is extremely good, Freya.

F: So I would be interested to know, if you guys read the fish market scene, I'm not going to make you analyze it now, 'cause you have to open it up, like what about it is actually funny? Because I—from my point of view I know how I was trying to make it funny, but I'm not sure what worked.

[51:08]

A: I—

M: —I can tell you exactly what, for me—

A: —okay.

M: —what was funny was— so, darling listeners, the fish market scene, in which our mischievous bastard of a mage has been forced to stomp around being lectured at about the history of fishing on this fucking island he does not want to be on with his stoic general that the's secretly in love with just kind of being there and being dutiful and this mage has had it.

A: Yeah.

M: And, so, for me the moment that made it funny was the moment when—someone flings a fish. And that wasn't it. The thing that made it hilarious was when the stoic, dutiful general snaps and starts throwing them too.

A: Yes. I was going to say the octopus. [laughs]

M: Yeah. yeah.

F: And that is quite—that's good to know because I wrote this deliberately to be a tension puncturing scene.

M: Exactly that.

A: Right.

F: It's like a sex scene or a fight scene. A scene like this will puncture—

M: —It's like the storm breaking.

F: Yeah. If you've been building tension up in your novel, you have to realize something is going to break it, and I had been deliberately building character tension between these two people and I was like, right, for the story to move on, we need to lower down and this is how it's going to happen. But on a line basis, I think we mentioned earlier that a very well chosen dialogue tag can do a lot and also using beats of interwoven dialogue to show there's a lot of stuff happening at one time. Or even just using a really good adjective for the way a fish falls to the ground. And so, I think you can put a lot of craft into these things, even though sometimes you're just writing something and "haha! This is quite funny!" You know you can instinctively feel it. Like you can instinctively feel the beats of a scene. Or the beats of a conversation or beats of standup

comedy. But if you're trying to write something that is deliberately funny, sometimes you literally just have to sit there and go what is a funny word?

A: [laughs] Yes.

F: And you're not laughing while you're writing it, but you're trying to make something that will make other people laugh by seeming effortless but isn't.

A: Yeah, right. Yeah. And, I mean, humor is a lot about inviting your audience in because—I think you mentioned this earlier, Macey, about the social aspects of humor.

M: Mhm.

A: And how you can use it as an ingroup vs outgroup identifier. People who laugh at your joke are part of your ingroup. But you can also use humor and comedy in a nastier way, either against people or to push people away from you, alienate them in some way.

M: There's something that a lot of social status TV shows, shows like [Revenge](#) or [Pretty Little Liars](#), do very effectively when they want to show someone is on the outside of a social group. They will have the queen bee use a joke that everyone else laughs at, even if it isn't addressed to the outcast but it's just something that they wouldn't get, and then the queen bee is like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. You wouldn't know that, would you?"

A: Right! Because it's drawing attention to the—

M: —It's brutal!

A: —It's brutal, yeah. And it's drawing attention to the fact that this one character is missing some crucial piece of context that everybody else has.

M: Mhm.

A: Yeah.

F: An interesting thing, jumping off of that, the way characters use humor can be very impactful when it comes to setting them up as 'are we on their side, or not?'

M: Yes.

F: So if you have a character who tends to use humor to exclude people, to punch down at people who are lower in power or authority or privilege than them, we are automatically not on that person's side.

M: Right.

F: Because that's something that we find distasteful and we don't want to hang around that person.

M: It's a subtler kick-the-puppy.

F: Yeah, it's the—

M: —You know the thing where you make a character kick a puppy so that you know this is a bad character that you shouldn't be liking. It's the person who laughs at the waitress who trips and falls rather than helping her up.

A: Yep.

F: Yeah. And it's subtler because it's the kind of thing some of us may have had applied to us or seen happen much more frequently. Whereas, there aren't that many people in real life who go around kicking puppies.

M: One hopes.

F: Yeah, one hopes. I mean, they're out there, but in terms of what we interact with on a day-to-day basis and what we may associate with people we have not liked, or unpleasant situations that we may have been in.

M: Whereas, when it comes to craft and writing humor, I am almost superstitious about not actively trying to? I am—very much to the frustration of my agent and many of you lot—a discovery writer. And people are like, “And then what happens?” and I'm like [vague, noncommittal noise that also sounds like a rubber chicken being garroted]

A: [the noise that means ‘I don't know’ without actually pronouncing a single letter]

M: “Okay, Macey, where is your outline?” and I hand you fifteen words on a whiteboard and say, “This is my entire third act.”

A: Sometimes—now, to be fair, to be fair—sometimes you hand us a [Florence + the Machine](#) album.

M: Sometimes I do hand you—no! I like two songs from the Florence + the Machine album.

A: You're right. Only two—a single. Two songs.

F: And you're like, "This is my third act!" These two songs and this beautifully fleshed out character sheet—

M: Yep, yep.

A: Yup!

F: —are my third act.

M: And so, for me, humor has to come from inside of a character, and it has to be very organic when I'm writing a scene, that it will be funny in that way, and I have a really hard time trying to do that on purpose, or deciding in advance that I want this to be a "funny scene".

A: Yeah.

M: And I'm kind of scared of creating humor, so I'm just like, if I hide under a blanket, this doesn't exist, maybe it'll be fine.

A: That is so, so weird to me, because you're such a funny person.

M: Right. But I don't—it's harder when it's on paper.

A: ... Alright.

M: You know, I'm funny because I'm very quick.

A: That's true.

F: Whereas, for me, I think I'm comfortable with humor, and I'm still working on what kind of humor is in my particular voice, but because I have written fanfiction for deliberately funny canons—I wrote a [The Importance of Being Ernest fanfic](#), in which I basically was very deliberately trying to do Oscar Wilde humor. I've written a [Brooklyn Nine-Nine fanfic](#) where the humor came from adequately being able to capture the ensemble vibe and the particular voices of those individual characters. That's been quite useful for me because I think back to what kind of character produces funny dialogue? What kind of character produces a funny situation? And what are the different ways you can make that happen in text because I've definitely tried my hand at a few different ways by aping someone else's style.

M: That makes sense. And I think as we head towards the last few minutes of our podcast, we wanted to spare a little bit of time to talk a little bit through the fourth wall. Not that we acknowledge the fourth wall ever on this podcast—

A: —We never—

M: —*Darling listeners*.

F: We record in a box. We are never going to be listened to.

[stilted laughter]

A: So, why are we funny?

M: Are we funny?

A: I—uh—apparently we are. Because people keep tweeting at us about how they're mad at us because they keep having to stifle laughter while they're on public transportation, and—

M: Well part of—

[laughter]

F: Part of it is that we laugh a lot and if you're listening to people laughing, if you're involved in the conversation emotionally, and if you're engaged, other people laughing will make you want to laugh.

M: That's fair.

A: And sometimes it's 'cause we have to listen to Macey saying the word 'yeet' in her accent [M: kekekeke] and sometimes it's because Freya has established this persona of great poise and dignity and then she'll say 'lay-zeeer' in a really funny voice and we'll never get to hear it again, but it comes out of the blue and takes you by surprise.

M: Yeah! Sometimes there'll be a surprise dick joke from Freya in the middle of something and we will just have to take a stunned, silent moment.

F: I feel like at this point you should not be that surprised at my dick jokes.

M: We're not surprised, they're always just perfectly placed and we'll take a moment to appreciate them.

A: Yes.

M: Unlike many penises.

F: We have been doing this for 42 episodes now. We have on-running gags.

M: Yes we do.

F: We have a basis of shared context which the listeners, if they have been listening for awhile understand things about our personalities and the way that we relate to each other and what our interests are, and so we can say words like 'robot boners' or 'Freya talks about [Captive Prince](#)'—

A: —Drink—

F: —or other things that are on the drinking game, but I think that we can have more impact with less because, at this point, we have a shared canon.

M: I think also, the fact that we can make each other groan and tell us to shut up is funny for the listeners as much as anything. But hey! Listeners, why don't you tell us?

A: Tell us! Why are we funny, listeners?

M: Why are we funny? I don't know that we can do it on purpose. I don't think that's how this works.

F: Please do not write in and request more puns.

A: Yeah, please don't do that.

M: [giggles gleefully] No! It's fine. If you write in and request more puns, I promise that instead of more puns, which I do not do because I don't pun on demand—

A: —I'm bracing myself.

M: —I will explain [String Theory](#).

A: ...Okay. Fine.

F: I mean, I'm pretty sure you could make String Theory funny.

M: I managed to make Tchaikovsky's gay crisis pretty funny.

A: It's true, you did.

F: Just the words 'gay crisis' are inherently funny when you put them next to the word Tchaikovsky.

M: He's Russian. What Russian is not having a gay crisis at any one point in time.

A: This is an in-joke that the listeners will not find funny unless you give me time to explain it. There was this time when I was trapped in a car with Macey. [M cackles] Macey locked all the doors, to take me to the airport, and—

M: —I locked the doors because we were moving at 60mph.

A: —locked the doors—

M: —I didn't feel it prudent for Alex to exit.

A: —locked me into a car—

F: —I'm pretty sure you were visiting her—

A: Let me finish! Let me finish. Macey locked me in a car and turned on some Tchaikovsky's violin concerto and proceeded to narrate the entire thing to me for like thirty entire minutes. Things like, "Oh, and this is his gay panic moment."

M: This is lots of flutes because he's realizing he's in love with his student.

A: Right.

M: There's lots of fluttery emotion feelings coming from the trombones, which is not where I would have put them, but who knows.

A: [sputters] so, Macey is a very funny person. We do have to end this podcast at some point, dear listeners.

M: We should.

A: So I'm going to tell you one more thing that is hilarious but drives me up the fucking wall. At the beginning of every episode before we start recording, Macey never has her audio ready to go. I'm always hounding her, "Macey have you done an audio check yet?" and Macey always says, "Never! Would I ever be ready to go? No!" And then, when I'm writhing and dying on the floor, saying, "Macey, please, for god's sake, just be ready to record this episode." She'll stop and just start showing me random small things that are on her desk, like handfuls of pens or coughdrop wrappers. Right now she's showing me some kind of small twig that she apparently found outside or something.

F: See, the problem is, now I have this Pavlovian response to Macey just lifting things towards the camera, and I start giggling.

A: [giggling] Yep. It's bad. It's bad—oh, it's apparently a piece of wire. She has bent it into a shape for us. [theme music begins, softly]. Thank you so much for listening, dear listeners. Let's get the fuck out of here before Maey shows us any more trash from her desk.

[giggles]

[theme music begins in earnest]

M: Hey, everybody. Thanks for joining us in the episode of Be the Serpent, a podcast of extremely, *extremely deep* literary merit, in which we attempted the deeply unfunny task of explaining why things are funny. I am still unconvinced that people who write humor are anything but witches. For me, humor is so much about spontaneity and surprise in a well understood context, that constructing it in text is just magic.

But anyway, we have some even more exciting topics to talk about in upcoming episodes. On the next episode, two weeks hence, on the 11th of September we'll be discussing fusions and crossovers. If you want to prepare in advance, one of the tentpole for that episode is the fic [With Fire in Their Eyes](#) by Asuka Kureru, which is a crossover between [Pacific Rim](#) and [Yuri!!! On Ice](#). So, if you have a friend who's into stuff like that, maybe give them a heads up.

In the meantime, feel free to continue the conversation with us. Questions, comments, breathless adulations, contact us at serpentcast@gmail.com, @serpentcast on [Twitter](#) and [Tumblr](#), or join in the conversation at our [fan Discord chat](#), which is linked on the About the Show part of our website. If you enjoy the podcast, please consider supporting us on [Patreon](#). And by the way, I think you're funny enough to make a penguin laugh.

What We're Into Lately

[Their Brilliant Careers](#) by Ryan O'Neill

[Which Witch](#) by Eva Ibbotson

[Schitt's Creek](#)

[Harry Potter](#)

[Lettered](#) (writer in *Schitt's Creek* and *Harry Potter* fandoms)

[Good Omens](#)

[Black Spot](#)

[Black Sails](#)

[Detroit: Become Human](#)

[the Cats trailer](#)

Other Stuff We Mentioned

Hannah Gadsby's Netflix special [Nanette](#) and Ted Talk, "[Three Ideas. Three Contradiction. Or Not.](#)"

[*The Hobbit*](#) by J.R.R. Tolkien
[*Blackadder*](#)
[*Absolutely Fabulous*](#)
[*Buffy*](#)
[*The West Wing*](#)
[*The Lion King*](#)
[*The Unspoken Name*](#) by A.K. Larkwood
[*Cabin Pressure*](#)
[*To Say Nothing of the Dog*](#) by Connie Willis
[*Rocky Horror Picture Show*](#)
[*Unseen Academicals*](#) by Terry Pratchett
[*My Fair Lady*](#)
[*Jane the Virgin*](#)
[*One Day at a Time*](#)
[*In Other Lands*](#) by Sarah Rees Brennan
[*M*A*S*H*](#)
[*Blackadder Goes Forth*](#)
[*Pagan series*](#) by Catherine Jinks
[*Lymond series*](#) by Dorothy Dunnett
[*A Civil Campaign*](#) by Lois McMaster Bujold
[*Mark Reads*](#), a video series by Mark Oshiro
[*Revenge*](#)
[*Pretty Little Liars*](#)
[*Florence + the Machine*](#)
[*The Importance of Being Ernest*](#)
Freya's Wilde [fanfic](#)
[*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*](#)
Freya's B99 [fanfic](#)
[*Captive Prince*](#)
[*String Theory*](#)
[*Pacific Rim*](#)
[*Yuri!!! On Ice*](#)

For Next Time

[*With Fire in Their Eyes*](#) by Asuka Kureru