

# A Delightful Comedie Premise

Barry N. Malzberg

Dear Mr Malzberg:

I wonder if you'd be interested in writing - on a semi-commissioned basis, of course - a funny short-story or novelette? Although the majority of your work, at least the work which I have read, is characterized by a certain gloom, a blackness, a rather despairing view of the world, I am told by people who represent themselves to be friends of yours that you have, in private, a delightful sense of humour which overrides your melancholia and makes you quite popular at small parties. I am sure you would agree that science fiction, at least at present, has all the despair and blackness which its readers can stand, and if you could come in with a light-hearted story, we would not only be happy to publish it, it might start you on a brand-new career. From these same friends I am given to understand that you are almost thirty-four years of age, and surely you must agree that despair is harder and harder to sustain when you move into a period of your life where it becomes personally imminent; in other words, you are moving now into the Heart Attack Zone.

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Dear Editor:

Thank you very much for your letter and for your interest in obtaining from me a light-hearted story. It so happens that you and my friends have discovered what I like to think of as My Secret... that I am not a despairing man at all but rather one with a delicious if somewhat perverse sense of humour, who sees the comedy in the human condition and only turns out the black stuff because it is now fashionable and the word rates, at all lengths, must be sustained.

I have had in mind for some time writing a story about a man, let me call him Jack, who is able to re-evolve the sights and sounds of the 1950s in such a concrete and viable fashion that he is actually able to *take* people back into the past, both individually and in small tourist groups. (This idea is not completely original; Jack Finney used it in *Time And Again*, and of course this chestnut has been romping or, I should say, dropping around the field for forty years, but hear me out.) The trouble with Jack is that he is not able to re-evolve the more fashionable and memorable aspects of the 1950s, those which are so much in demand in our increasingly perilous and confusing times, but instead can recover

only the failures the not-quite-successes, the aspects-that-never-made-it. Thus he can take himself and companions not to Ebbets Field, say, where the great Dodger teams of the 1950s were losing with magnificence and stolid grace but to Shibe Park in Philadelphia, home of the Athletics and Phillies, where on a Tuesday afternoon a desultory crowd of four thousand might be present to watch senile managers fall asleep in the dugout or hapless rookies fail once again to hit the rising curve. He cannot, in short, recapture the Winners, but only the Losers: the campaign speeches of Estes Kefauver, recordings by the Bell Sisters and Guy Mitchell, the rambling confessions of minor actors before the McCarthy screening committee that they once were Communists and would appreciate the opportunity to get before the full committee and press to make a more definite statement.

Jack is infuriated by this and no wonder; he is the custodian of a unique and possibly highly marketable talent - people increasingly love the past, and a guided tour through it as opposed to records, tapes, rambling reminiscences would be enormously exciting to them - but he cannot for the life of him get to what he calls the Real Stuff, the more commercial and lovable aspects of that cuddly decade. Every time that he thinks he has recaptured Yankee Stadium in his mind and sweeps back in time to revisit it, he finds himself at Wrigley Field in Chicago where Wayne Terwillger, now playing first base, misses a foul pop and runs straight into the stands. What can he do? What can he do about this reckless and uncontrollable talent of his, which in its sheerest perversity simply will not remit to his commands. (It is a subconscious ability, you see; if he becomes self-conscious, it leaves him entirely.) Jack is enraged. He has cold sweats, flashes of gloom and hysteria. (I forgot to say that he is a failed advertising copy writer, now working in Cleveland on display advertising mostly for the Shaker Heights district. He needs money and approbation. His marriage, his *second* marriage, is falling apart. All of this will give the plot substance and humanity, to say nothing of warm twitches of insight.) He *knows* that he is onto something big, and yet his clownish talent, all big feet and wide ears, mocks him.

He takes his problem to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist takes some convincing, but after being taken into the offices of *Cosmos* science fiction to see the editor rejecting submissions at a penny a word, he believes everything. He says he will help Jack. This psychiatrist, who I will call Dr Mandleman, fires all of his patients and enters into a campaign to help Jack recover the more popular and marketable aspects of the fifties. He too sees the Big Money. He moves in with Jack. Together they go over the top forty charts of that era, call up retired members of the New York football Giants, pore through old Congressional Records in which McCarthy is again and again thunderously denounced by two liberal representatives...

Do you see the possibilities? I envision this as being somewhere around 1500 words but could expand or contract it to whatever you desire. I am very busy as always but could make room in my schedule for this project, particularly if you could see fit to give a small down payment. Would fifty dollars seem excessive? I look forward to word from you.

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Dear Mr Malzberg:

I believe that you have utterly misunderstood my letter and the nature of the assignment piece.

There is nothing *funny* in a fantasy about a man who can recapture only the ugly or forgotten elements of the past. Rather, this is a bitter satire on the present which you have projected, based upon your statement that 'people love their past', with the implication that they find the future intolerable. What is funny about *that*? What is funny about failure, too? What is funny about the Philadelphia Athletics of the early 1950s with their ninety-four-year-old manager? Rather, you seem to be on the way to constructing another of your horrid metaphors for present and future, incompetence presided over by senescence.

This idea will absolutely not work, not at least within the context of a delightful comedic premise, and as you know, we are well-inventoried with work by you and others which will depress people. I cannot and will not pay fifty dollars in front for depressing stuff like this.

Perhaps you will want to take another shot at this.

\* \* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Thanks for your letter. I am truly sorry that you fail to see the humour in failure or in the forgettable aspects of the past - people, I think, must learn to laugh at their foibles - but I bow to your judgment.

Might I suggest another idea which has been in mind for some time? I would like to write a story of a telepath, let me call him John, who is able to establish direct psionic links with the minds, if one can call them 'minds', of the thoroughbreds running every afternoon (except for Sundays and three months a

year) at Aqueduct and Belmont race tracks in Queens, New York. John's psionic faculties work at a range of fifty yards; he is able to press his nose against the wire gate separating paddock from customers and actually get *inside* the minds of the horses. Dim thoughts like little shoots of grass press upon his own brain; he is able to determine the mental state and mood of the horses as in turn they parade by him. (Horses of course do not verbalize; John must deduce those moods subverbally.)

Obviously John is up to something. He is a mind reader; he should, through the use of this talent, be able to get some line on the outcome of a race by knowing which horses feel well, which horses' thoughts are clouded by the possibility of soporifics, which other horses' minds show vast energy because of the probable induction of stimulants. Surely he should be able to narrow the field down to two or three horses anyway *which feel good* and, by spreading his bets around these in proportion to the odds, assure himself of a good living.

(I should have said somewhat earlier on, but, as you know, am very weak at formal outlines, that John's talents are restricted to the reading of the minds of *animals*; he cannot for the life of him screen the thoughts of a fellow human. If he could, of course, he would simply check out the trainers and jockeys, but it is a perverse and limited talent, and John must make the best of what God has given him, as must we all - for instance, I outline poorly.)

The trouble is that John finds there to be no true correlation between the prerace mood or thoughts of horses and the eventual outcome. Horses that feel *well* do not necessarily win, and those horses from whom John has picked up the most depressing and suicidal emanations have been known to win. It is not a simple reversal; if it were, John would be able to make his bets on the basis of reverse correlation and do quite well this way; rather, what it seems to be is entirely *random*. Like so much of life, the prerace meditations of horses appear to have no relationship to the outcome; rather, motives and consequences are fractured, split, entirely torn apart; and this insight, which finally comes upon John after the seventh race at Aqueduct on June 12, 1974, when he has lost fifty-five dollars drives him quite mad; his soul is split, his mind shattered; he runs frantically through the sparse crowds (it is a Tuesday, and you know what OTB has done to race track attendance anyway) shouting, screaming, bellowing his rage to the heavens. 'There's no connection!' he will scream. 'Nothing makes sense, nothing connects, there is no reason at all!' and several burly Pinkertons, made sullen by rules, which require them to wear jackets and ties at all times, even on this first hot day of the year, seize him quite roughly and drag him into the monstrous computer room housing the equipment of the American Totalisator Company; there a sinister track executive, his eyes glowing with cunning and evil

will say, 'Why don't you guys ever learn?' (he is a metaphor for the Devil, you see; I assure you that this will be properly planted, and the story itself will be an *allegory*) and, coming close to John, will raise a hand shaped like a talon, he will bring it upon John, he will...

I propose this story to be 25,000 words in length, a cover story in fact. (You and Ronald Walotsky will see the possibilities here, and Walotsky, I assure you, draws horses very well.) Although I am quite busy, the successful author of fifteen stories in this field, two of the novels published in *hardcover*, I could make time in my increasingly heavy schedule to get the story to you within twelve hours of your letter signifying outline approval. I think that an advance in this case of fifty dollars would be quite reasonable and look forward to hearing from you by return mail, holding off in the meantime from plunging into my next series of novels which, of course, are already under lucrative contract.

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Dear Mr Malzberg:

We're not getting anywhere.

What in God's name is *funny* about a man who perceives 'motives and consequences to be entirely fractured ... torn apart?' Our readers, let me assure you, have enough troubles of their own; they are already quite aware of this or do not *want* to be aware of it. Our readers, an intelligent and literate group of people numbering into the multiple thousands, have long since understood that life is unfair and inequitable, and they are looking for entertainment, release, a little bit of *joy*.

Don't you understand that this commission was for a *funny* story? There is nothing funny about your proposal, nor do I see particular humour in an allegory which will make use of the appearance of the Devil.

Perhaps we should forget this whole thing. There are other writers I would rather have approached, and it was only at the insistence of your friends that I decided to give you a chance at this one. We are heavily inventoried, as I have already said, on the despairing stuff, but if in due course you would like to send me one of your characteristic stories, *on a purely speculative basis*, I will consider it as a routine submission.

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Dear Editor:

Please wait a minute or just a few minutes until you give me another chance to explain myself. I was sure that the two story ideas you have rejected, particularly the second, were quite funny; but editorial taste, as we professional writers know, is the prerogative of the editor; and if you *don't* see the humour, I can't show it to you, humour being a very rare and special thing. I am however momentarily between novels, waiting for the advance on the series contract to come through and *would* be able to write you a story at this time; let me propose one final idea to you before you come to the wrong conclusion that I am not a funny writer and go elsewhere, to some wretched hack who does not have one quarter of the bubbling humour and winsomely comprehensive view of the foibles of the human condition that I do.

I would like to write a story about a science-fiction writer, a highly successful science-fiction writer but one who nevertheless, because of certain limitations in the field and slow payment from, editors, is forced to make do on an income of three thousand four hundred and eighty-three dollars a year (last year) from all of his writings and, despite the pride and delight of knowing that he is near or at the top of his field, finds getting along on such an income, particularly in the presence of a wife and family, rather difficult, his wife not understanding entirely (as she *should* understand) that science fiction is not an ultimately lucrative field for most of us but repays in satisfaction, in *great* satisfactions. This writer, who we shall call Barry, is possessed after a while by his fantasies; the partitions, in his case, between reality and fantasy have been sheared through by turmoil and economic stress, and he believes himself in many ways to be not only the creator but the receptacle of his ideas, ideas which possess him and stalk him through the night.

Barry is a gentle man, a man with a gracious sense of humour, a certain *je ne sais quoi* about him which makes him much celebrated at parties, a man whose occasionally sinister fictions serve only to mask his gay and joyous nature ... but Barry is seized by his fantasies; people do not truly understand him, and now at last those aforementioned walls have crumpled : he takes himself to be not only the inventor but the *hero* of his plot ideas. Now he is in a capsule set on Venus flyby looking out at the green planet while he strokes his diminutive genitals and thinks of home; now again he is an archetypical alien, far from home, trying to make convincing contact with humanity; now yet again he is a rocketship, an actual physical rocketship, a phallic object extended to great length and power, zooming through the heavens, penetrating the sky.

I'll do this at 1500 words for five dollars down. Please let me hear from you.

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Dear Mr Malzberg:

This was a doomed idea from the start. I hope you won't take this personally, but you need help.

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Dear Editor:

My husband is at Aqueduct today, living in a motel by night, and says that he will be out of touch for at least a week, but I know he would have wanted me to acknowledge your letter, and as soon as he returns I assume he'll be in touch with you. I assume also that in saying that he needs 'help' you are referring to the fact that, as he told me, you were commissioning a story from him with money in front, and I hope that you can send us a cheque as soon as possible, without waiting his return. He said something about a hundred or a thousand dollars, but we'll take fifty.

Joyce Malzberg