



Reading in the Middle Years (9-11): Assessing the uses and quality of laughter and subversion in children's poetry

Article Author:

[Andrew Lambirth](#) [1]

[169](#) [2]

Article Category:

[Other Articles](#)

Byline:

Andrew Lambirth explores the role of subversive poetry.

Adults have long attempted to encourage the habit of reading with different motivating strategies ? including the texts that are offered to children. Here **Andrew Lambirth** makes the case for introducing humorous poetry from ?subversive? poets and with no other motive than delight and amusement.

<!--break-->

I'm particularly interested in ?funny poems?, as my discussions with children have shown that such poems have particular appeal and the potential to motivate further reading. Some of this material prompts a form of laughter that ?lives on the edge? of primary school practice and is sometimes deemed by adults to be ?inappropriate? in the relatively formal confines of school. Often called ?urchin verse? (Rowe Townsend 1974, Styles 1998), these poems speak of the raw edge of life ? everything from the muddle of domesticity to scatological subjects. This is not the poetry of flowers, woods and meadows.

Children's literature has a growing list of texts that explore more scatological and ?urchin-like? subjects and encourage a certain form of laughter ? McMillan's **Why Do Dogs Sniff Bottoms?**; Babette Cole's **Dr Dog**; Kirtzwinkle's **Walter the Farting Dog** and **Walter Farts Again**; Holzworth's **The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of his Business** to name just five. Poetry collections too have their fair share of texts that exploit children's subversive dispositions.

A while ago I had the pleasure of talking to a group of Key Stage 2 children about poetry. I read some poems and discussed their appeal. All the children declared a love for poetry and all of them said they loved ?funny poems? best of all. Two of the poems I read were arguably examples of ?urchin verse? ? ?Eddie and the Nappy? by Michael Rosen and ?Arthur Wigglesbottom? by Andrew Collett. Collett belongs to a group of popular poets published by the King's England Press known as The Potty Poets.

In ?Eddie and the Nappy?, the poem describes in free verse the hilarious process of changing Eddie's nappy. During this skilled operation the father in the poem (Michael Rosen) needs to coax the child to comply using funny child-like language. He chases after Eddie in order to begin the nappy changing process and is then kicked and gently humiliated by the child's mischievous antics. Despite the benign nature of the father's actions, the child is determined to avoid adult control. Arguably, these child-like irrational acts spurn the rational and practical endeavours of the father. The child is in defiance of adult initiated rationality and order and power is exchanged between adult and child: Eddie has

the 'upper hand' and the adult in the poem is even forced to speak like a child. The children I talked to loved these moments. One told me: 'I like it how the baby was described and how the baby acted? the baby's trying to get him off by kicking and everything.' The children also loved the moment that the cream is slopped on the baby's 'bum'. They loved to imagine with horror the sensation that this would cause. Laughter was also invoked by the focus on the body and its functions and, of course, the use of the word 'bum' which the children used repeatedly in our conversations, increasing the subversion. The children commented on Rosen's use of free verse. One of the stated reasons for liking the poem was because it 'was not like other poems, it's set out like a story'. Again, arguably it subverts one's pre-conceptions of the structures of poetry written for children.

The children in the group were generally not so keen on 'Arthur Wigglesbottom'. This surprised me as Collett and the Potty Poets' work is very popular. This poem is from Collett's collection **Always Eat Your Bogies and Other Rotten Rhymes**. Clearly, the title of this book invokes a form of subversion as it celebrates scatological subjects, not normally associated with books provided by schools. 'Arthur Wigglesbottom' is written in rhyming verse and has Arthur describing some of his disgusting personal habits: sucking his toes, eating his finger nails and ear wax. It's a poem that celebrates the ingestion of one's own bodily waste and fluids. One child in my group who did like it said 'I like it because Arthur Wigglesbottom is like me and it makes me feel sick.' One girl declared she did not like it 'because it's not hygienic'.

Comparing the humour

Collett has a manifesto addressed to parents at the beginning of his book. His aim is to 'promote the reading of poetry through humour. Some might argue that cow pats and bogies should not be the subject of 'real' poetry. I understand this. But if, through reading this book, I can establish the reading habit with just one child, then it will have served its purpose.' (Collett, 1998:5). This then is humorous poetry with an arguably covert purpose. The poems are intended to act as pedagogical and motivating devices rather than just being poems. I would suggest this works at the expense of quality, reducing poetry to a tool to reach the pedagogical objective.

In contrast, Rosen's poetry actively colludes with children (not parents) who live in controlled and rational environments. There appear to be no hidden agendas in his work other than to bring delight to his readers. He holds a mirror up to children's 'childness' (Hollindale, 1997) (their perceptions of what it means to be a child), their environment and the adults that control and care for them. In Rosen's poems he initiates a discourse, through the literature itself, between adults and children and children and children about the nature of the condition of being a child. The children in my group embraced Rosen's meanings and rejoiced in his delicious subversion that foregrounds a child's world for the children's enjoyment rather than attempting to manipulate their world 'manipulation being a common objective of the relationship between those who wish to exert power and influence over others' including adults over children. The history of adult manipulation of children's literature has parallels with the use of humour and recreation in the history of the relations between the church, the state and the people.

The Carnival of Poetry and Children's Literature

Laughter always has had an uneasy relationship with officialdom and its institutions such as schools (Presdee, 2000). Although laughter signifies pleasure and delight, it can also be associated with subversion, disorder and lack of respect, particularly in places like schools.

The 20th-century philosopher, literary critic and historian Bakhtin explains how laughter can be seen as subversive. Bakhtin (1984) describes our everyday adherence to rules and the norms of society 'the laws of the state and institutions like school and the work place' as the 'primary life' of the people. Yet, according to Bakhtin, underneath this appearance of compliance, fester our repressed desires to break away from such imposed rationality. Bakhtin introduces his notion of the carnival, as the moments when a 'second-life' appears and flourishes for set periods of time. Historically, carnivals sanctioned this 'second life'. The medieval period of carnival was a time for transgression when people, normally highly controlled and ordered by society, were allowed to mock its values. It was a time when order was 'turned on its head' and slaves become masters, fools can be kings and the private functions of the body are

celebrated: 'Thus the carnival is the people's second life, organised on the basis of laughter' (Bakhtin, 1984:198). Bakhtin contends that the second life is expressed by making the body rather than the mind the focus, mocking human bodily functions and relishing the generally grosser side of existence. In history, periods of carnival helped to revive the spirits of those living in the oppressive dark and the cold of winter, or during times of hardship and dismay. Yet importantly for this discussion, although being a relief-giving time and a period of emancipation, carnival was *used* by those who impose the normal rules and regulations, as a way of allowing the people to 'let off steam' before the re-imposition of the normal order takes hold.

It was Stephens who made a link between the theory of carnival and children's literature. He showed that the carnival can be found in some of its forms, manifesting itself in laughter and playfulness and 'to some extent taboo language is used to disclose ways in which adult incompetence masks itself in adult authority, and more generally to construct subject positions in opposition to society's official structures of authority' (Stephens, 1992:121). Like carnival, as described by Bakhtin, poetry can come in the form of scatological humour, and in so doing it can subvert, by its seeming inappropriateness within the context of children's literature. It can also parody the institutions and power-structures of society: for children, this means parodying the world of adults and adult control over children. Both Rosen and Collett's work does this in their own way and consequently invokes the carnival.

Like the medieval authorities who sanctioned carnival for the peasants, the laughter which is encouraged by children's poets such as Collett is instrumental in nature and reaffirms and embeds the objectives of the controlling order. Despite its evocation of the carnival, its real purpose, although being benign and well-meaning, is a form of manipulation and control. On the other hand, Rosen's work appears to have less of an adult agenda and simply wishes to celebrate the experience and perceptions of 'childness' (Hollindale 1997). Rosen, for me, honours and respects the intelligence and sense of humour of children and presents a literature that is 'urchin' in a more genuinely subversive way because he respects children's right to a genuine literature for children 'with no hidden strings or agendas.

References

Bakhtin, M (1984) **Rabelais and his World** Bloomington, Indiana University Press

Hollindale, P (1997) **Signs of Childness in Children's Books** Stroud, Thimble Press

Presdee, M (2000) **Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime** London, Routledge

Rowe Townsend, J (1974/1987) **Written for Children** London, Penguin

Stephens, J (1992) **Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction** Harlow, Longman

Styles, M (1998) **From the Garden to the Street: Three Hundred Years of Poetry for Children** London, Cassell

Children's Literature

'Eddie and the Nappy' in Rosen M (1983) **Quick, Let's Get Out of Here** London, Puffin

'Arthur Wrigglesbottom' in Collett, A (1998) **Always Eat Your Bogies and Other Rotten Rhymes** Rotherham, King's England Press

Cole, B (1996) **Dr Dog** Red Fox

McMillan, D (2002) **Why Do Dogs Sniff Bottoms?** Southwood Books

Holsworth, W, & Erlbruch W (1996) **The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of his Business**, Chrysalis Books

Kotzwinkle, W, & Murray, G (2001) **Walter the Farting Dog** Frog Ltd

Kotzwinkle, W, & Murray, G (2005) **Walter Farts Again** Puffin

Andrew Lambirth is Principal Lecturer in Education, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Illustrations by Quentin Blake from Michael Rosen's **Quick, Let's Get Out of Here** (Puffin, 978 0 14 031784 8, £4.99 pbk).

How can we ensure that all children have the opportunity to enjoy books and develop their reading skills? In the final instalment of 'Reading in the Middle Years' in **BfK** No 170, **Kimberly Safford** will focus on inclusion and the rights of every child to be a reader.



[Andrew lambirth.jpg](#) [3]

Andrew Lambirth

Page Number:

8

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/169/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/reading-in-the-middle-years-9-11-assessing-the>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/andrew-lambirth>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/169>

[3] http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Andrew_lambirth.jpg