



AN INTERVIEW WITH JON SCIESZKA

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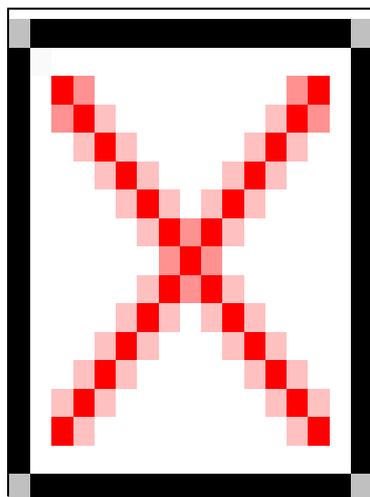
[Julia Eccleshare](#) [1]

[208](#) [2]

Byline:

The bestselling US author interviewed.

Bestselling US author **Jon Scieszka** made a special visit to the UK to promote his new book **Frank Einstein and the Antimatter Motor**. **Julia Eccleshare** interviewed him for **Books for Keeps** and, fifteen years after they first met, found him as fast-talking as ever, and even more passionate about books and reading.



It is almost fifteen years since I first met and interviewed [Jon Scieszka](#) [3]. But there is not much about that meeting that I have forgotten. He was one of the most engaging and quickest-witted person I'd ever encountered. And the fact that he said he'd honed that sharp style round the dinner table where, as the second oldest of six brothers, he'd learnt to make an impact - and fast - was especially endearing as I was in middle of raising three sons who were trying some of the same things on at our dinner table.

But unlike most wise-cracking teen boys whose families recite their jokes lovingly to others, Jon hadn't let that wit lie dormant. He knew it was something special and considered becoming a stand-up comedian before deciding that he could use his humour and deft use of language to better effect in a classroom. In 2003, at the time of our first meeting, Jon had only relatively recently swapped from teaching to being a full time writer and his enthusiasm for working with the freshness and ebullience of seven to nine year olds in an 'elementary' school was infectious.

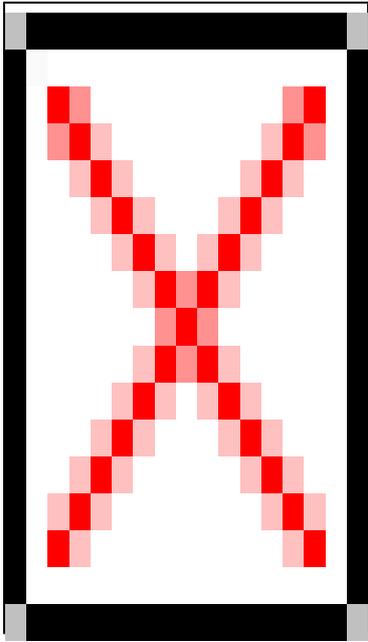
It was also the source of his inspiration: **Math Curse**, illustrated by Lane Smith, the book he was in London promoting at the time, is a wonderfully and delightfully fresh and demystifying look at maths. And it was born out of his experience of teaching Kafka's **Metamorphosis** to eight year old pupils in a private school founded on alternative principles in New York City. From how the kids he taught responded, Jon realised that founding stories on the things they knew and understood and then adding a twist or new element that would send them off into new territory was a pretty sure-fire way to grab their attention and turn them into readers.

Math Curse put Jon on the map in the UK but he had already had much acclaim in the US with previous titles [The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales](#) [4] which was a **Caldecott Honour Book** and **The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs**

I wrote then that the loss to teaching was children's books gain. That could have just been stating the obvious since Jon had been so quick to gather in a slew of awards and some very big sales and so could easily have just gone on doing the same thing. After all, he had a sure fire winner on his hands and who could want more than that? His publishers would certainly have been happy; that was exactly what they wanted.

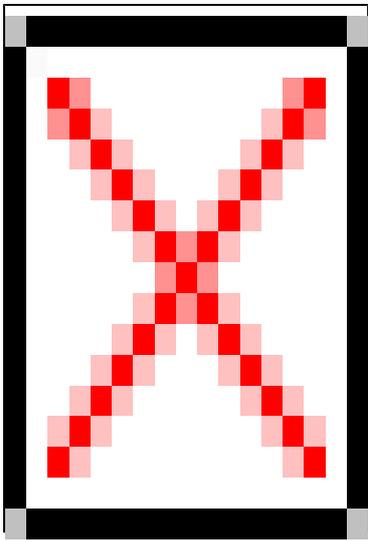
But, picking up the story now after the intervening decade and more, the story has taken a different turn. And I feel gratified that the gain to children's books I had highlighted has been amply proven and fully-harvested in the intervening years. Behind that newly-published funny guy producing some rule-breaking books lurked a sure-footed and passionate writer with an exceptional gift of communicating with young readers in many different ways.

Catching up with Jon was no easy feat. He was dashing through London and then around the rest of the UK to



promote his new book, [Frank Einstein and the Antimatter Motor](#) [5], the first in a new, highly illustrated series of stories which are based on science but science that is turned into fun as it is presented in an unusual, mildly dotty and hilarious story with excellent illustrations to match. Jon is as entertaining as ever and even more passionate about kids and reading and it was a great pleasure to catch up with him at a fast-talking lunch.

If the man hasn't changed, his position in children's books certainly has. In 2008 Jon Scieszka got a call inviting him to become the first National Ambassador for Children's Literature in the US. "I thought it was a prank call from Lane Smith. They said, "We want someone to go out and be lively". I thought I could do that. I'm so glad I took it on." Something about the awe of that moment remains even now. It was a two year post with no traditions or expectations so Jon could make of it what he liked. "It gave me credibility with adults so I was able to get more attention for children's books and reading. As it is part of the Library of Congress things are quite slow-moving but it does get listened too by government - a bit! Now there have been other National Ambassadors - Kate di Camillo is the current holder of the rank - they join together to promote the wider benefits of reading. Examples of their success include the setting up by Dr Peri Klass of [Reach Out and Read](#) [6], a national literacy programme for children that is located with health professionals rather than in schools and so has a different way of operating and sphere of influence.



Describing his US wide tour of schools in his ambassadorial role Jon readily reveals just how much he had enjoyed it. Of course, he knew he'd like the part that involved talking to loads of kids but he hadn't known how much fun could be had out of playing around with the pomp and ceremony that the children attached to the title.

The choice of Jon for this role came not only from his significant contribution as an author but also because everyone knew how brilliant he was at speaking to kids and adults about reading and its importance. Jon has campaigned passionately in particular for boys as readers. He was prompted to set up and fund [Guys Read](#) [7], a web-based site run as a not-for-profit outfit with a mission to 'motivate boys to read by connecting them with materials they will want to read, in ways they like to read', partly as a response to the US national assessment of educational progress statistics which showed that boys did worse in reading tests at every grade level and partly because of his own experiences. 'From being one of 6 boys at home and then teaching in an all-boys elementary school I was very aware that boys were not in the least interested in most of the books that were given to them. I thought we needed different kinds of books that would get the guys to enjoy reading.' The site carries an extensive and well-arranged reading list of 'books that guys read', advice on how to run a book club for boys and links to authors whose books are especially likely to appeal to boys. Since 2010 Jon has added a number of **Guys Read** anthologies written by top children's writers and genre-themed with 'Funny Business' and 'Thriller' being among the most popular.

With so much going on, it is no wonder that far, far too soon my time was up. We'd only just touched on his worries about how today's parents 'don't give the kids space to be learners' and his even bigger worries about digital and how reading on screen 'tells a child to go away and get on with it' while a picture book says 'come here, let's share'. Both of these strike against the heart of all Jon believes in. He just has time to tell me 'I trace our world back to oral storytelling. I am the guy at the campfire telling the story. No one else gets to talk to their audience. That's what we want to get back to.' And then he is off, travelling across the UK, getting back to the oral storyteller that is at the heart of all he does - and loving it. After all, as he says, 'it's a real relief from just sitting in my room. And I love to feel what they think.'

And I'm left thinking 'lucky kids!'

Julia Eccleshare is a writer, broadcaster and lecturer, and the Guardian's children's books editor. She is a judge of the [Branford Boase](#) [8] first novel prize and was made an M.B.E. in the Queen's Honours list in June 2014 for services to Children's Literature.

[Frank Einstein and the Antimatter Motor](#) [5], Jon Scieszka, Amulet Books, 978-1419715068, £6.99 pbk

Math Curse, Jon Scieszka illus Lane Smith, 978-0670062997, O/P

[The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales](#) [4], Jon Scieszka illus Lane Smith, Puffin, 978-0140548969, £7.99 pbk

Page Number:

33

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[4] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/84/childrens-books/reviews/the-stinky-cheese-man-and-other-fairly-stupid-tales>

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