



What is Humour?

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Lance Salway talks about humorous books and recommends Odes to raise some necessary laughter.

Lance Salway suggests it's simply

Whatever Makes You Laugh

Ogden Nash, in one of his wry poems, once observed that 'In this foolish world there is nothing more numerous / Than different people's senses of humorous.' <!--break-->This is very true, of course, but there is nothing more numerous either than attempts by psychologists and philosophers (Freud and Kant and Aristotle among them) to define and explain humour, and to establish exactly what it is that makes people laugh, and why. As far as I know, no one has yet succeeded in nailing down a convincing explanation of humour but Alvin Schwartz, a noted American folklorist, has offered a definition that is as good as any: 'Humour is the comic quality in a person, experience, or idea that makes one laugh.'

To children - and adults, too - this 'comic quality' can vary enormously. They will laugh at anything, from trick conundrums ('What is yellow and dangerous?' 'Shark infested custard.') to rude limericks ('A musical student from Sparta . . .'), and from sly pain-inflicting rhymes ('Adam and Eve and Pinch-Me') to so-called sick jokes ('Mummy, mummy, why do I keep on walking in circles?' 'Shut up, or I'll nail your other foot to the floor!') They will even fall about at the sound of a single word - 'knickers', for example - if it is uttered in an unsuitable place by an unlikely person. But although these varied comic stimuli may provoke a humorous response, they do not provoke it equally. We do not all laugh at the same things. Only television studio audiences do that. Why is it then that a stand-up comedian or a film or a book will make one person laugh but not another? Why does Frankie Howerd make me laugh but not my wife? Why don't I find Laurel and Hardy amusing, and why does the humour of P.G. Wodehouse leave me cold (mind you, I loved his books when I was twelve or so)? What do people see in Max Bygraves?

Why is there such a gap between 'different people's senses of humorous'? Whatever the reason (and I don't intend to suggest an explanation), a wide variety of humorous children's books exist to satisfy the human need for laughter. Most picture books for young children contain a degree of humour, for authors and artists are well aware that comedy is an easy way to capture the attention of the child and to illustrate the idea that books can mean enjoyment. It has been suggested, though, that few small children really recognise humour as such. A child who is meeting conventional language and experiences for the first time will lack the ability to distinguish the congruous from the incongruous, or to separate fact from fantasy. Young children take stories seriously, and the adventures of, say, the elephant and the bad baby or naughty Nancy, the bad bridesmaid, may seem exciting and strange to them but not particularly funny. And, of course, much of the visual and verbal humour in many picture books is aimed over the child's head at the adult reader-aloud, or is included as a private joke of the artist or author. Without such jokes, though, the mind of the strongest parent or teacher might well buckle beneath the sheer banality of many books for the younger child.

It is when they reach seven or eight years old that children begin to properly appreciate the wealth of humorous books

available to them. Beginning with the robust comedy of Paddington Bear and **The Magic Pudding**, and moving on to the hilarious adventures of human characters like Nurse Matilda and Jacob Two-Two (**Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang**, Mordecai Richler) and Josh McBroom, (**McBroom's Wonderful One-Acre Farm**, Sid Fleischman) a rich variety of amusing writing awaits their enjoyment, culminating in the more subtle, sophisticated - and mainly transatlantic - comedies of Betsy Byars and Judy Blume, of Anne Fine and Paul Zindel.

Yet, despite their popularity with young readers - or because of it? - funny books are not really respectable. They never have been. It is not for nothing that the most popular and despised reading matter for children is called a comic. And it is all too often assumed that if a story is amusing then it cannot possibly be Worthy or Improving or Good Literature. Funny books do sometimes win awards (Penelope Lively's **The Ghost of Thomas Kempe**, for example, and E.L. Konigsburg's **From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler**) but not very often. As Marcus Crouch once observed on this subject, 'Our self-conscious concern for Children's Literature either as a vehicle for social theory or as an art form, gets in the way.' Every now and again Children's Literature and Humour do combine to splendid effect - look at **The Strange Affair of Adelaide Harris** and **The Eighteenth Emergency** and **The Piemakers** (Helen Cresswell) - but all too often the twain do not meet. If some of our more prestigious children's writers could be persuaded to amuse their readers for a change, then we would have better funny books and funnier good books.

Compiling a descriptive list of humorous children's books, as I have done, can present unusual problems. Other book lists, whether they be of multi-cultural books or learning-to-read books or fairy tales or award winners, are all based on easily defined and easily recognised criteria of selection. But opinions differ as to whether and to what extent any book is funny, and the degree to which children will be amused by it, if at all. All I had to guide me was my own enjoyment of the books I chose, and my own experience or estimation of their effect on young readers. **Humorous Books for Children** is therefore a personal choice of amusing reading, intended for those parents and - teachers who are looking for funny books to recommend or read aloud, and for those people who, like me, feel that humour has for too long been neglected as a significant factor in children's enjoyment of books.

Children's senses of humorous may well be numerous but then so are children's books. Difficulty only arises when one attempts to match one with the other. With any luck, **Humorous Books for Children** will help with this. At the very least, I hope that it may be a step in the right direction. After all, laughter is one of the necessities of life, and it is only right that it should be one of the necessities of reading too.

Some Necessary Laughter

From his list **Humorous Books for Children** Lance Salway has chosen twenty books with assorted kinds of laugh appeal.

Books for younger children come first; but we have resisted grouping them by age of reader/listener because the great thing about funny books is that at their best they cross all age barriers. That's why they are good for sharing.

Up and Up, Shirley Hughes, Bodley Head, 0 370 30179 X, £3.50.

A small girl finds that she is able to fly and proceeds to lead a mob of astonished adults a merry dance around the town until she comes to earth with a bump. An enchanting story, told without words, and illustrated with humorously detailed drawings.

Benjamin and Tulip, Rosemary Wells, Kestrel, 0 7226 5253 4, £1.95.

'Every time Benjamin passed Tulip's house, she said, "I'm gonna beat you up." And she did.' Benjamin gets his own back in the end, though, in a very simple story about two raccoons.

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, Judith Viorst, illustrated by Ray Cruz, Angus and Robertson, 0 207 95485 2, £2.95.

The succession of disasters which overtake Alexander on one awful day will be familiar to all children who, like him, quarrel with their best friend, go to the dentist and have beans for dinner when they hate beans.

Father Christmas, Raymond Briggs, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 02260 6, £3.50 (Picture Puffin paperback, 0 14 050.125 8, £1.10).

A day in the life of the old codger, told in bright comic-strip style. A glorious picture book that young children return to again and again.

The Wild Washerwomen, John Yeoman, illustrated by Quentin Blake, Hamish Hamilton, 0 240 89928 1, £3.95.

A raucous tale of seven washerwomen who rebel against their tight-fisted employer and run joyfully amok all over town until they settle down with seven jovial woodcutters.

How Tom Beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen, Russell Hoban, illustrated by Quentin Blake, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 00999 0, £3.50 (Picture Puffin paperback, 0 14 050.244 0, 70p).

Tom's iron-hatted maiden aunt tries to tame him by sending for Captain Najork and his hired sportsmen, but they are no match for Tom, the greatest fooler-around and mucker-about that there is. The magnificent nonsense of the story is ideally matched by Blake's wild and wonderful pictures.

Flat Stanley, Jeff Brown, illustrated by Tomi Ungerer. Methuen (Read Aloud. Books), 0 416 80360 1, £3.25 (Magnet paperback, 0 416 57290 1, 55p).

Young Stanley Lambchop is squashed flat when a bulletin board falls on his bed one night. Much of the humour in this splendidly idiotic story lies in the matter-of-fact way in which his family accept Stanley's misfortune.

Ramona the Pest, Beverly Cleary, illustrated by Louis Darling, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 02412 9, £3.95 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.0774 5, 75p).

The story of Ramona Quimby's first days at kindergarten, and the comedy and confusion which she causes there and at home. Not a book for Ramona-aged children but one for their older brothers and sisters who will appreciate the maddening logic of a lively five-year-old.

Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf, Catherine Storr, illustrated by Marjorie-Ann Watts, Faber and Faber, 0 571 18011 6, £3.25 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.0312 X, 70p).

Short hilarious stories about an enterprising small girl and how a stupid wolf's attempts to catch and eat her are always foiled by his own incompetence.

My Uncle Podger, Jerome K. Jerome, adapted and illustrated by Wallace Tripp, Dent, 0 460 06782 6, £3.95 (Currently out of print).

Wallace Tripp has raided the third chapter of **Three Men in a Boat** for the story of bombastic Uncle Podger's disastrous attempts to hang a picture, and transformed the characters into late Victorian rabbits in the process. Jerome's humour hasn't dated at all, and Tripp's pictures are hilarious.

The Magic Pudding, Norman Lindsay, Angus and Robertson, 0 207 94392 3, £4.50 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.0098 8, 60p).

A fast and furious Australian classic in which Bunyip Bluegum, Bill Barnacle and Sam Sawnoff attempt to protect a magic pudding called Albert from 'puddin' thieves'. Good for reading aloud, but only if you can manage the accent.

The Fox Busters, Dick King-Smith, illustrated by Jon Miller, Victor Gollancz, 0 575 02444 5, £3.25 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.1175 0, 75p).

A refreshing comedy set on a farm about a running feud between chickens and marauding foxes. The account of how the foxes are finally defeated by a blitz of hard-boiled eggs laid by dive-bombing hens in mid-flight is highly ingenious and very funny.

The Great Ghost Rescue, Eva Ibbotson, illustrated by Simon Stern, Macmillan, 0 333 17625 1, £3.95.

Humphrey the ghost is a disappointment to his loathsome family (his mother is a Hag smelling of unwashed armpits and very old feet) but it is he who saves the day when the ghosts of England are driven from their familiar haunts by modern progress. Do not on any account miss this hilarious book.

Nurse Matilda, Christianna Brand, illustrated by Edward Ardizzone, Hodder and Stoughton, 0 340 03702 4 £2.50 (Knight paperback - August 1981, 0 340 17462 5, 85p).

A classic comedy about a vast Victorian family of very wicked children (thirty-six, all told) and how they are brought to heel by the ferociously ugly Nurse Matilda. Ideal for reading aloud.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Barbara Robinson, illustrated by Judith Gwyn Brown, Faber and Faber, 0 571 10593 9, £3.50 (Beaver paperback, entitled *The Worst Kids in the World*, 0 600 34526 2, 60p).

The sharp and hilarious account of a large family of deprived children who, following a misunderstanding, take over the main parts in the annual nativity play. Something different to read aloud at Christmas.

The Eighteenth Emergency, Betsy Byars, Bodley Head, 0 370 10924 4, £2.75 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.0863 6, 70p). A sympathetic study of a boy faced with real fear (attack by the biggest boy in the school) who summons up the courage he needs to face the situation. The story is told with all the humour and understanding that are typical of this fine American writer.

Wilkins' Tooth, Diana Wynne Jones, illustrated by Julia Rodber, Macmillan, 0 333 14548 8, £3.95 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.0765 6, 60p).

Frank and Jess start a small firm called Own Back Ltd. ('Revenge Arranged') in order to supplement their pocket money, and are immediately drawn into a tangled adventure. A highly original, highly enjoyable comedy for top juniors.

The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler, Gene Kemp, illustrated by Carolyn Dinan, Faber and Faber, 0 571 10966 7, £3.95 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.1135 1, 75p).

Authentic school setting, dialogue and situations distinguish this very funny story about Tyke's last term at primary school. And there's a stunning twist in the tail, too.

The Strange Affair of Adelaide Harris, Leon Garfield, illustrated by Fritz Wegner, Kestrel, 0 7226 5095 7, £3.15 (Puffin paperback, 0 14 03.0671 4, 60p).

An elegant and complex comedy, set in early nineteenth-century Brighton, about the confused train of events caused by the disappearance of the infant Adelaide. Still Garfield's most enjoyable book.

The Summer-House Loon, Anne Fine, Methuen, 0 416 86180 6, £3.95 (Magnet paperback, 0 416 87650 1, 65p).

An example of that rare literary species: the funny British teenage novel. An engaging and original story of two young people whose erratic courtship is helped along by the daughter of a blind professor.

Lance Salway trained as a librarian and worked as a children's and schools librarian in North London before going to Longman's Young Books as an editor. He is now a freelance writer, editor, translator, and reviewer of children's books.

Recently out in paperback is **Forger** (Puffin, 0 14 03.1114 9, 95p), an information book for juniors about famous and remarkable frauds, counterfeiters, fakes and deceivers, taking in the Great Barnum, Piltdown Man, Van Meegeren, and Major Martin, the man who never was.

Lance Salway lives in Sherborne, Dorset, with his social worker wife.

Humorous Books for Children is a Signal Booklist, recently revised in a second edition. It is available from The Thimble Press, Lockwood, Station Road, South Woodchester, Stroud, Gloucestershire GL5 5EQ, and from the NBL, Book House, 45 East Hill, Wandsworth, London SW18 2QZ. Price £1.10. Also available is an NBL touring exhibition of the books on the list. Details from the NBL.

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