



## New (-ish) Tales for Old

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**Jon Scieszka**, revamper extraordinary, talks to **Chris Powling**.

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As the son of a New York elementary school principal, never mind being a former teacher himself and a would-be medical student who was diverted into writing fiction, Jon Scieszka has no doubts about the need to keep educational options open - especially with regard to children's reading. 'I can understand the anxieties of parents, or people in general, who want the best for their kids ... but you can't just make a list and say "this book when you're four, this book when you're seven" because it gives an entirely false sense of security. Also I think we've probably all had the experience of having books ruined for us by a teacher.' Even his own work has suffered from over-zealous pedagogy. 'I hear sometimes from kids who've had to do seven different lessons on **The True Story of the Three Little Pigs** ... I'm worried they may want to come and murder me in my sleep.'

It's a point well made - though the sheer flair of his stories, with their maverick attitude to their own subject-matter, to language, and to established storytelling techniques, almost certainly keeps them safe from classroom catastrophe. **The True Story of the Three Little Pigs**, for instance, is told from the point of view of the wolf, while **The Frog Prince Continued** begins with but goes on

*'Well, let's just say they lived sort of happily for a long time. Okay, so they weren't so happy. In fact, they were miserable. ...'*

and soon reveals the kind of reality behind a Royal Marriage that most kids, these days, will recognise instantly. Small wonder that at the end of the tale ... well, readers are best left to find this out for themselves.

His most recent picture book, **The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales**, begins ahead of its own title page and proceeds immediately afterwards to an upside-down dedication. Thereafter, well-known nursery narratives are given the Scieszka treatment-'Chicken Licken', 'The Really Ugly Duckling', 'The Tortoise and the Hair' (sic), 'Cinderumpelstiltskin', 'Little Red Running Shorts', 'Jack's Bean Problem' and, as the sub-title puts it, 'much, much more!'. More, in this case, includes ongoing gags involving his two narrators, Jack and the Little Red Hen (whose own tale never quite gets told), and some of the zaniest typographical and bibliographical jokes I've ever come across in a children's book. Jon Scieszka makes no apologies for this pirating of established folk and fairy tales 'since these are stories that have really held up and can best bear infinite variation'. He's also well aware that his self-referential and inter-textual approach has a perfectly respectable intellectual pedigree. He cites a string of past practitioners, from that arch subversive Laurence Sterne in the eighteenth century to Joyce, Nabokov and Borges in our own day, not forgetting current children's writers like Allan Ahlberg whom he much admires. His own approach, he's quick to add, has less literary roots too - in the humour of Monty Python and Buster Keaton.

In fact, the visual aspect is crucial. His writing career only took off when he was shown some paintings by Lane Smith. 'I just took a look and said "that's what I want my book to look like!"' Soon they were collaborating. 'My imagination is almost purely visual and textual . . . so I used to come over and look at what he was doing with my stuff and say "this is *amazing*".'

Even so, Lane Smith's sombre, formalist approach, with its own witty references to favourite painters such as Paul Klee, at first actually added to their difficulties in finding a publisher for **The True Story of the Three Little Pigs**. 'People would tell us that the artwork was too dark, too sophisticated, and so was the text - they didn't give kids credit for seeing what we were about.'

Nowadays, of course, following this and other successes, such sophistication has become something of a Lane-Scieszka trademark - indeed, he insists that a third collaborator on **The Stinky Cheese Man** was the book's designer, Molly Leach. 'We'd take the book to her and she'd say, "Well, that idea doesn't really work ..." and come up with something better.' Recently, he says, he was delighted when a young reader explained a Leach typographical joke to him which he'd completely missed.

But, then, Jon Scieszka trusts kids. His series with Lane Smith, called 'The Time Warp Trio' takes Joe, Fred and Sam back to the days of King Arthur in **The Knights of the Kitchen Table**, the age of pirates in **The Not-So-Jolly Roger**, and the Wild West in **The Good, The Bad and The Goofy**, with other time-travelling adventures to follow. It doesn't bother him in the slightest that these affectionate romps might be a child's first literary encounter with the genre he's sending up. His own early experience of fairy tales, he points out, was watching the famous Tex Avery cartoons on television's **Rocky and Bullwinkle Show**. 'It's a perfect teach-able moment when the kid at the back says "sounds sort of familiar ... is that like, say, "The Gingerbread Man"?' They can then work back from my stories. The important thing is to give kids a handle, a connection. Then you don't have to tell them reading is FUN. If you have to come out and say it, if they haven't discovered it for themselves, then you've missed out, and messed up, somewhere along the line.'

Amen to that, says **BfK**.

Jon Scieszka's name, by the way (pronounced Shess-ka) is the Polish word for 'path'. If only John Patten, and the devisers of our English Orders, could be persuaded to follow it.

### **Book details**

All hardbacks are from Viking and all paperbacks from Puffin.

By Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith:

**The True Story of the Three Little Pigs**, 014 054056 3, 13.99 pbk

**The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales**, 0 670 84487 X, £9.99; 0 14 054896 3, £4.99 pbk

**The Knights of the Kitchen Table**, 0 670 84194 3, 0.50; 0 14 036398 X, £2.99 pbk

**The Not-So-Jolly Roger**, 0 670 84193 5, £7.50; 014 036397 1, £2.99 pbk

**The Good, The Bad and the Goofy**, 0 14 036399 8, £2.99 pbk

By Jon Scieszka and Steve Johnson:

**The Frog Prince Continued**, 0 670 84119 6, £7.99; 0 14 054285 X, £3.99 pbk

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