



Humor In Children's Literature

Margaret C. Gillespie

Wide grins, soft chuckles, light snickers, hearty guffaws and rollicking laughter are among the varied responses triggered by the wit, fun and fancy which abound in the content of literature for children. Sometimes the fun lies in the sheer nonsense and inventiveness of the words such as in Laura Richards' *Eletelephony*,

Once there was an elephant
Who tried to use the telephant
No! no! I mean an elephone
Who tried to use the telephone
(Dear me, I am not certain quite
That even now I've got it right.)
Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
Entangled in the telephonk:
The more he tried to get it free,
The louder buzzed the telephoe—
(I fear I'd better drop the song
Of elehop and telephong'.)

and in Edward Lear's unforgettable limericks:

There was an old man with a beard
Who said, "It is just as I feared!
Two Owls and a Men,
Four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my
beard,"

There was a Young Lady of Norway,
Who casually sat in a doorway;
When the door squeezed her flat,
she exclaimed, "What of that?"
This courageous Young Lady of Norway.

William Brighty Rands' *Godfrey, Gordon, Gustavus, Gore*, the young man who just wouldn't shut the door is another example of nonsense and alliteration so appealing to children.

Impossible and incongruous situations such as Seuss creates as he recounts the saga of the faithful Horton hatching lazy Maisie bird's egg; Ruth Krauss' invention of *The Backward Day*; Virginia Kahl's duchess rising to great heights with her cake in *The Dutchess Bakes a Cake* or Slue-Foot-Sue in *Pecos Bill* flying up into the clouds and bouncing up and down again on her hustle are gleeful literary experiences. There is fun and anticipation for children, too, in plots which involve the main character's outwitting his opponent or overcoming adverse conditions as does the wily

Little Red Hen, Jack the Giant Killer and Jack in *The Jack Tales* who outwitted the devil. Sometimes the humor lies in the hapless but often amusing plights which befall the Ingalls girls in the *Little House* series, the Melendy children in *The Saturdays*, and other well-loved characters in the "it could have happened" stories involving home and family relationships. Sometimes the hilarity is created by the credulity of such characters as poor Mr. Vinegar who made such deplorable trades, vain *Petunia*, literal-minded Epaminondes and Mrs. Peterkin, *The Lady Who Put Salt in Her Coffee* by mistake and then consulted the chemist and the herb woman before seeking the advice of the wise lady from Philadelphia who calmly suggested making a fresh cup of coffee. These dolts and sillies of the old folk tales and their modern counterparts continue to be perennial favorites of children not only because of the nonsensical quality of their behavior, but possibly because the young lis-

teners and readers gain a feeling of satisfaction in the knowledge that their wisdom and reasoning power are obviously superior to that of silly Petunia and the rest.

Children also laugh at "themselves in fur." The younger set enjoy the mischievous exploits of the irrepressible Peter Rabbit, Angus and others. The subtler, somewhat whimsical humor of *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton is enjoyed by older children. The tiny folk borrow thimbles to use as kettles and postage stamps for use as pictures from "human beans."

A story in which laughter and pathos are artfully intermingled is E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. This tale of fantasy recounts the story of the pig, Wilbur. The little runt was saved from an early demise by Fern, the farmer's daughter. After a period of satisfactory growth Wilbur's life was spared again through the ingenious devices of Charlotte, the intelligent spider.

Early Literature Not So Gay

But children's literary fare was not always so gay. The children of the early settlers of our country were fed on a diet of manners and morals that would be considered grim by the most stoic adult. *The New England Primer* first published in 1691 admonished the young reader that, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all." The fact that books for children were then almost non-existent may have been a blessing in disguise. Children's only recourse was in listening to the tales and reading the stories told and written for adult consumption; and taking unto themselves those in which they found fun, excitement and adventure as in *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*.

One of the first notes of gaiety in literature for children was struck by Clement Moore in 1822 with the advent of "*A Visit from St. Nicholas*,"

now known by children the world over as "The Night Before Christmas." Dancer, Prancer, Donner and Vixen were gay names for reindeer and what could be merrier than a man who had "cheeks like roses and a nose like a cherry" with a "round little belly" that shook like "a bowl full of jelly" when he laughed. Jolly old St. Nick was followed in 1846 by another memorable "break-through" in humor for children's reading fare with the publication of Edward Lear's famous *The Book of Nonsense*. Here, indeed, is found suitable fun for both children and adults and fit fare for kings.

And then, of course, came Lewis Carroll's Alice who was "curiouser and curiouser" and whose curiosity uncovered a world of make-believe that continues to be a legacy of fantasy and humor for both children and grown-ups. For example this dialogue in the Mad Hatter's Tea Party;

"Take some more tea," invited the March Hare. "I've had nothing yet," Alice replied in an offended tone, "so I can't take more." "You mean you can't take less," said the Hatter, "it's very easy to take more than nothing."

Wit, Fun and Fancy

The *Peterkin Papers* followed in the 1870's and *Little Black Sambo* and *Peter Rabbit* made their welcome debuts in 1900. Thus the stage was set for books with wit, fun and fancy which provide memorable experiences for today's boys and girls.

But why humor for children? Why not "Adam's Fall" or "Manners and Morals" and other thinly veiled didactic preaching and teaching content? Isn't life real and earnest? Yet, we were all admonished repeatedly that "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Max Eastman in *The Enjoyment of Humor* seems to concur with this axiom and presents evidence for the rationale that all humor is a form of play. The French

would call it "joie de vivre." Psychologists underline the importance of humor by listing joy, fun and recreation among their various hierarchies of basic human needs. There appears to be consensus among most observers that fun and a sense of humor are essential attributes of the human organism in maintaining equilibrium while withstanding in Shakespeare phraseology, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

What, then, are the ingredients of stories that provoke spontaneous laughing responses in children?

Childrens Humor

What concoctions of words and plot sequences do they find to be gay, amusing, hilarious or side-splittingly funny? Observation and experience in sharing books with children suggest a wide spectrum ranging from simple, broad, slapstick humor, often found in books for the very young, to the more sophisticated, subtle and often whimsical humor found in books for older boys and girls.

Humorous content is to be found in old folk tales, modern fanciful tales, and in realistic stories. Children's poetry is well-laced with delightful humor, too. Humorous stories and tales often possess an ageless quality being enjoyed by young and old alike. Witness the popularity of the bull named Ferdinand, that remarkable non-conformist who had no inclination to attain fame and fortune in the bull ring but preferred to sit under the cork tree happily and aimlessly smelling the flowers.

The sound and flavor of words as they reach the ear and roll off the tongue create pleasure for children.

Skinny Mrs. Snipkin,
With her little pipkin,
Sat by the fireside a-warming of
her toes.
Fat Mrs. Wobblechin,
With her little doublechin,
Sat by the window a-cooling of
her nose.

This jingle can be depended upon to produce gales of laughter in the four and five year olds. Henny-Penny is a show-stopper not only because she created a "disaster area" from a falling leaf by inferring that "the sky's a-going to fall" but also because of the nomenclature of her friends: Cocky-Locky, Ducky-Daddles, Goosey-Poosey, Turkey-Lurkey and, of course, sly old Foxy-Loxy.

Huskier fare with rolling alliteration and onomatopoeic words is found in selections such as *The Pirate Don Durk of Dowdee*, who was "perfectly gorgeous to see" with a "floppy plume on his hat" and "his conscience, of course, as black as a bat."

Christopher's Robin's "wheezles and sneezles" which might turn into "measles" and the "foxes who didn't wear soxes" exemplify A. A. Milne's remarkable talent for juggling words with exquisitely humorous results.

Reading Aloud

Kipling's *Just So Stories* explain with a kind of logical nonsense *How the Leopard Got His Spots* and *How the Whale Got His Throat* and how the "satiabale curiosity" of *The Elephant's Child* led him to the Bi-Colored-Python Rock-Snake who spanked him with his "scalesome flailsome tail" for asking so many questions. Eventually the elephant's child stumbled over a crocodile who lived down by the "great grey-green greasy Limpopo River all set about with fever trees" And thereby hangs the tale of how the "blackish bulgy nose as big as a boot that could wriggle from side to side but couldn't pick up things" became a long trunk. These stories must be read aloud so that children may truly enjoy and appreciate Kipling's matchless ability to string words together to create some of the most amusing and "Best Beloved" stories of all.

Many old folk tales kept alive by

the story tellers of long ago as well as modern fanciful tales are sources of excitement and gayety for children. The accumulative tales with their chain reactions have strong attraction for the four to six or seven year old child. *The Old Woman and Her Pig* with its humorous chant is a perennial favorite. Children will chuckle with anticipation as they hear or read "water won't quench fire, fire won't burn stick, stick won't beat dog, dog won't bite pig, piggy won't go over the stile and I shan't get home tonight" for the child audience senses that at some point the spiral action will reverse and the little old woman *will* get home tonight.

The Bremen Town Musicians is an example of an accumulative tale enjoyed by the sixes and sevens. The bedlam created by the four animals when the robbers return to the house is vastly amusing and wonderful fun to recreate with realistic sound effects.

Accumulative tales often contain, as do many other stories, elements of surprise or unusual turns of events with humorous consequences. These stories are sources of excitement and gayety. The style is as old as the story of *Rumpelstilkin* in which this famous dwarf's anger in being foiled never fails to delight children.

"The devil told you that! the devil told you that!" cried the little man, and in his anger he stamped with his right foot so hard that it went into the ground above his knee; then he seized his left foot with both hands in such a fury that he split in two and there was an end to him.

And this style is as new as Tworikov's superb story about the stately *Camel Who Took a Walk*. Just at the exact moment when all of the chicanery which the tiger, the squirrel, the chipmunk and the bird had contrived was going to commence, would you

believe it—the camel gave an awful yawn, turned around and retraced his steps. What happened? Nothing happened, of course, except that it is the funniest thing that ever happened to young listeners.

When Miss Clavel turned on the light and said "Something is not right" for the second time in Bemelman's mirthful story of Madeline, the listeners' anticipatory giggles are heard. Gales of laughter follow as Miss Clavel finds her eleven charges weeping copiously. They wanted to have their appendixes out, too, in order to gain the attention which Madeline is receiving.

In *Blueberries for Sal*, McCloskey artfully develops the delightful switch of human and bear mothers and their two offspring. Tension and humor are intermingled as the little bear follows the human mother up the mountain to pick blueberries while Sal follows the bear mother with her pail. It's a good joke for the fives and sixes.

Nobody, and surely not the children, would dare to call the king a "fussy man" in A. A. Milne's *The King's Breakfast*, but a satisfying uproar ensues as the alderney, with great temerity, suggests he "try a little marmalade instead of butter to his bread."

The persistent efforts of Katy No-Pocket to find a suitable pocket in which her boy Freddy might ride (since she had no pouch) were rewarded when she met a man who seemed to be "all pockets"—big pockets, little pockets, and middle-sized pockets." Katy's surprise and happiness as the carpenter tied his apron securely around her is replicated in the pleased faces of many youthful audiences. Discovering that the apron had pockets galore, what do you think Katy did?

"She put Freddy into the biggest one of all. Then into the next largest she put Leonard Lion. And

there was room for Tommy Tortoise, a baby bird, a monkey, a skunk, a rabbit, a raccoon, a lizard, a squirrel, a 'possum, a turtle, a frog and a snail."

This is perfectly logical nonsense for the five and sixes. What else *would* she do?

Outwitting the Foe

Clever monkeys have proved frustrating in many good yarns, but they out-do themselves in exasperating the poor peddler in Esphyr Slobodkina's *Caps for Sale*. The rascals have a lovely time with the caps which they borrow from the peddler while he was sleeping. It does look as though he has been outdone until his anger reaches such a peak that he throws his own checked hat to the ground. So what do the impish little mimics do? You've guessed of course. The children are inevitably vastly entertained and content with the outcome.

Cleverness and resourcefulness in outwitting opponents and foes is a recurring theme in children's literature frequently accompanied by humorous overtones in both fanciful and realistic stories. Jack's wiles and resourcefulness in eluding the giant in *Jack and the Bean Stalk*, and the cleverness of the third little pig are classic examples.

Clever Manka, who might have been a fine corporation lawyer in modern society, engage and amazes older boys and girls with her remarkable solutions to knotty problems. Having her husband, the burgomaster, carried out to the wagon after making him drowsy on good food and wine and taking him home with her because, "You know you told me I might take with me the one thing I liked best in your house, so of course I took you," is a superb ending to the tale. It is almost too much to expect even of this heroine. Some modern boys and girls have been overheard to exclaim at the

completion of this tale, "too much!"

But, of course, the all time champ of the manipulators can be none other than *Tom Sawyer*. Tom knew that there must be more than one way to whitewash a fence and the way he figured it out to his extreme satisfaction and pleasure remains a cherished literary memory for many boys and girls.

Stories dealing with incongruous and impossible situations provide moments of high excitement and hilarity in elementary school classrooms. Their popularity and appeal are validated by the "read it again" response.

Among the outstanding favorites in this category is Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which two swindlers masquerading as weavers successfully play a hoax on the vain Emperor and his gullible subjects until a little boy exposes them. "But he has nothing on."

The *500 Hats of Bartholemew Cubbins* by Theodore Geisel (Seuss) is another uproarious tale about the predicament of poor Bartholemew, who had problems in doffing his hat for the king because another hat always appeared.

The magical talents of *The Five Chinese Brothers* were remarkable. One of the brothers could swallow the sea, another could hold his breath indefinitely, the third could stretch and stretch his legs, the fourth had an iron neck and the last could not be burned. Children listen and laugh as they discover how these marvelous abilities awed the townspeople and frustrated the executioner.

Exaggerations

Older boys and girls enjoy the extravagance and exaggeration of the tall tales. The plots in these stories are "big" indeed. The adventures of Paul Bunyan of the lumber camps;

Stormalong, a New England sailor; Pecos Bill, a western cowboy, and John Henry, a railroad hand, provide the framework for the exuberant yarns with which the listener or reader joyfully "think's big."

Good humor for children is best derived from situations which permit them to laugh *with* rather than *at* people. The many stories of family life with well-drawn characters who seem to implicate and extricate themselves with remarkable frequency from exciting and often ludicrous escapades have great appeal for seven to twelve year olds. The book people may remind them of themselves, their best friend, the boy next door or someone they would like to be; for a time at least.

Family Stories

Most of the family stories and family chronicles have humorous incidents interwoven in the plot sequences such as the well-loved tomboys: Caddie Woodlawn, who is memorable for her resistance to relinquishing her tomboy fun to become a young lady; and Kate, in *The Good Master*, who climbed rafters, got mixed up with runaway horses and wreaked havoc in general until the taming influence of her understanding uncle became effective.

Some family stories are written primarily for their humorous appeal. The Moffat children, for example, seemed unable to live a mundane existence. In *The Moffats*, Jane made friends with Chief Mulligan after hiding in the bread box in front of Mr. Brooney's store. She did this to avoid being "rounded up as a criminal" because she had been mimicking Mr. Pennypepper's walk. Then, Rufus embarked on an escape which involved riding on a boxcar rather than being in the first grade classroom on the first day of school. The Moffats seemed to have an affinity for unusual occurrences

and the eight and nine year old child depends upon them for fun, excitement, and adventure in his reading.

Carolyn Haywood's, *Little Eddie* series, are favorites with the seven to nine age group, too. He is an avid collector of "valuables" and animals but Gardenia, the goat, proved to be too much for his family.

Beverly Cleary's famous Henry Huggins is no more successful at keeping out of scrapes than is Little Eddie. It took some ingenuity for a nine year old boy to get his newly adopted dog safely home on a bus against company regulations, but Henry solved the problem as he does so many others in a wonderfully amusing fashion.

Henry Reed, also belongs to this lively group of Junior Entrepreneurs. Laughter and fun result from the sign painted on the barn which read, "Henry Reed Research, Pure and Applied."

And fortunately, when children begin to outgrow Eddie, the two Henrys and others, they have Homer Price awaiting them. Homer, who had a mechanical mind, fitted two pieces into his uncle's doughnut machine and then made the batter with the help of the kind lady customer and turned on the switch.

"I guess that's about enough doughnuts to sell to the afternoon customers. I'd better turn the machine off for a while.

"Homer pushed the button marked "Stop" but nothing happened.

The incomparable series of events which ensued are wildly funny.

The repertoire of family fun is not yet exhausted. *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* are waiting in the wings. What eleven and twelve year old boy could resist laughter, though he may shiver a little, at the oath of that fabulous robber band called,

Tom Sawyer's Gang:

... and if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang but have a curse put on it and be forgot, forever.

... and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he musn't eat or sleep till he had killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts which was the sign of the band.

In contrast to the broad and sometimes flamboyant humor found in the family stories is the subtle and oftentimes whimsical humor found in some of the fanciful tales. Some of the outstanding examples also seem to follow a pattern of progression for elementary school age children.

Winnie the Pooh

Boys and girls who become acquainted with Christopher Robin in *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* move easily into the fun of Winnie the Pooh who muses about many things such as:

If there is a buzzing noise someone is making a buzzing noise and the only reason for making a buzzing noise that I know of is because you're a bee ... and the only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey, and the only reason for making honey is so I can eat it.

This lovely, egocentric, illogical logic involves Pooh Bear in innumerable hilarious situations, for example, eating too much and becoming stuck while trying to exit from rabbit's hole.

"Oh help," said Pooh, "I shall have to go back."

"Oh bother," said Pooh, "I shall have to go on."

"I can't do either," said Pooh. "Oh help and bother."

There's more to come with the *House at Poor Corner*. Young boys and girls should have the opportunity to become good friends with Christopher and company, since the charm and humor of these books remain with many into adulthood.

As children grow into the middle years of seven, eight, and nine they are ready for that wonderful man, Dr. Doolittle, who preferred to be an animal doctor rather than a people's doctor. There is the make-believe of that incomparable governess Mary Poppins who could conjure up a tea party suspended from the ceiling and make it seem commonplace. And children may laugh at the antics of Georgie in *Lawson's Rabbit Hill* who considered Phewie's interest in "garbidge" to be low taste.

"You just don't undestand garbidge," retorts Phewie. "Now there's garbidge and garbidge, just like there's Folks and Folks. Some Folks' garbidge just ain't fittin for—well, it aint fittin for garbidge."

Some children do not capture the nuances of Dr. Doolittle's observations relating to the foibles and frailties of the human race. The characterization of the pedantic Father who said:

"Now, my dear, do try to adopt a more optimistic attitude. This news of Georgie's may promise the approach of a more felicitous and bountiful era."

and the homespun philosophy of Uncle Analdus in *Rabbit Hill* may escape many young readers. Even a purely literal interpretation of these stories provides lively fun and laughter for boys and girls. Those who are able to capture the subtleties of characterization and plot sequences enjoy lasting experiences which provide readiness for the hilarious adventures of Toady and his

continued on page 23