



## From Homer to Hobbit: Humor in Books for Adolescents

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For whatever reasons, there are no Homer Prices, no Henry Reeds, no Henry Hugginses created for the adolescent reader. There are, of course, the timeless stories—even picture books—that belong to no particular age, only to a particular state of mind. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lear's nonsense verse, or Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer do not belong to any limited band of readers. Nor, among more recent classics, are these books of sheer delight the special province of the young: Robert McCloskey's *Lentil*, the story of the boy who couldn't sing and couldn't whistle but who came into his own on the harmonica; Munro Leaf's stories, with Robert Lawson's illustrations, of Ferdinand, the bull who liked best of all to sit beneath the shade of a cork tree and smell the

flowers, and Wee Gillis of the bagpipes; Dr. Seuss' Horton, the elephant who was faithful 100 percent. So also, Mary Norton's *Borrowers*—Afield, Afloat, and Aloft, Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, and Robert Lawson's *Ben and Me* and *Mr. Revere and I* can be enjoyed whenever and as often as one can put his hands on them.

In books written especially for the teen-ager, however, laughter is not an outstanding ingredient. Perhaps it is not possible for a Homer or a Henry to flourish during the adolescent years. Perhaps the adolescent himself would not welcome him. But he *does* need laughter in his life and one often wishes there were more books in which he could find it—books written especially for the younger adolescent reader.

The tall tales of our heritage have for many years provided amusement for the junior high school student as they have for the students in the upper elementary grades. Anne Malcolmson's *Yankee Doodle's Cousins*, Walter Blair's *Tall Tale America*, Irwin Shapiro's *Yankee Thunder*, and Esther Shephard's Paul Bunyan stories are fast-moving, well-written pieces of folklore, full of rip-snorting whoppers.

Among the just-for-fun books the junior high school students read are Don Allison and Frank Hill's *The Kid Who Batted 1000*, the story of a 17-year-Oklahoma boy who had a fantastic way with a bat, and Gene Olson's *The Red, Red Roadster*, in which a high school English teacher, Miss Tennessee Barberry, becomes an Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint Spider *afficionado* and turns school and



community upside down. Peggy Goodin's *Clementine* and Jessamyn West's *Cress Delahanty* are warm, genuine stories of young adolescent girls. In both novels, the heroines grow up—blue jeans to boy friends—and, while there is laughter, it is sympathetic laughter. Beverly Cleary, whose several books for the upper elementary school years are hilarious, has in *Fifteen*, written an early-teen story with many high-points of humor.

### Science Fiction

Several writers of science fiction have the light touch. Robert Heinlein, besides making life on Gany-mede or Luna or adventures through a time lock completely reasonable and exciting, gives to his characters many moments of fun. Certainly Willis, Jim's constant companion in *The Red Planet*, is one of the most enchanting of all space creatures and utterly hilarious in displaying his tape-recorder memory! In Poul Anderson's *The High Crusade*, a group of fifteenth-century crusaders find themselves—via space rocket—in quite another galaxy, but, with the clear vision of the British colonial, they carry on. Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet*—in which a flying saucer lands on earth—and Robert Nathan's *The Wrens*, in which Kenya scientists of the 1850's find traces of an old Western civilization, are sophisticated humor for the older reader of science fiction.

James Summers, writing from the boys' point of view of the teen-age culture, tries, and succeeds at least some of the time, in supply a humorous note. Some of Mary Stolz' characters, for example, Mrs. Armacost and her young son Johnny in *To Tell Your Love*, have a real sense of the ridiculous. Emily Neville, in *It's Like This, Cat*, laces a fine story with humor.

Most of the humorous books avail-

able to adolescents, however, were written for an adult audience but have been adopted by the teen-agers as their own and are read more widely by them probably than by any other group. Among these are such titles as Louise Baker's *Out on a Limb*, Hildegard Dolson's *We Shook the Family Tree*, Ruth McKenney's *My Sister Eileen*, and Frank Gilbreth and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey's *Cheaper by the Dozen* and *Belles on Their Toes*. The accounts of Hildegard's experiments with beauty mud or her feats in the chemistry lab, Eileen and the South American Navy, Father Gilbreth's demonstrations of the most efficient way to take a bath, or the family's initiation of Ernestine's beau from Saggy Aggy College are memorable. Margaret Scoggin's *Chucklebait* and *More Chucklebait* present selections from a score of entertaining books.

Two naturalists and writers, Britain's Gerald Durrell and Canada's Farley Mowat, have written a variety of books, including two humorous reminiscences of their boyhoods: Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* recounts his family's five years on the island of Corfu; Farley Mowat centers recollections of his Saskatchewan youth in tales of his eccentric dog, Mutt, "the dog who wouldn't be." Cornelia Otis Skinner and Emily Kimbrough describe most entertainingly their first trip to Europe in *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*. Marooned among the gargoyles of Notre Dame, or lost in the Hampton Court maze in an English rain, or dancing with money belts swinging wildly beneath their skirts, Cornelia and Emily are a heady pair!

Betty MacDonald's side-splitting, often acid-tongued (there were law suits) accounts of life on a chicken ranch on the Olympic Peninsula told in *The Egg and I*, her sojourn in a

sanitarium in *The Plague and I*, and her life among employers of many kinds in *Anybody Can Do Anything* add up to many hours of pleasure. William Saroyan dedicates *My Name Is Aram*, a book of "pleasant memories," to an "ugly little city containing the large comic world, and to the proud and angry Saroyans containing all humanity."

### Adult Novels— Teen-Age Audience

A number of novels, again written originally for an adult audience, have found continuing popularity with teen-agers—Margery Sharp's *Cluny Brown*, the lady plumber, and Paul Gallico's story of the London char who saved her money to buy a Paris original, Mrs. 'Arris Goes to Paris', Giovanni Guareschi's amusing adventures of Don Camillo, the sturdy little Italian priest, who carries on a running battle with the town mayor.

Leonard Wibberley's engaging application of the formula Lose-a-War-to-the-United-States—Put-the-Economy-Back-in-Order in *The Mouse That Roared* won many delighted readers and led to the sequels, *Beware of the Mouse* and *The Mouse on the Moon*. In a similar vein, Vern Sneider's *Teahouse of the August Moon*, the story of the "conquered" Okinawans, continues to captivate readers. Its hero, Sakini, is surely one of the world's most charming rascals.

Leonard Q. Ross' *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, written almost 30 years ago, still draws guffaws with Mr. Kaplan's adventures with Julius Scissor and Jawdige Vashington in Mr. Pockheel's night school class in English. In 1959, *The Return of Hyman Kaplan* (under Leo Rosten) added more tales of the indomitable Mr. Kaplan.

Richard Armour's light-hearted and irreverent essays are—in appro-



priate doses—invaluable in high school classes. His parodies of *Moby Dick* and *Silas Marner*, among others, in *The Classics Reclassified* (“‘Call me Ishmael,’—he had never liked the name Herman” and “But when his best friend stole some money from the deacon, planted evidence to make the blame fall on Silas, and then married Silas’s girl, his milk of human kindness lost some of its butterfat content”) are welcome antidotes for the more knowledgeable students. Shakespeare emerges in somewhat different form in *Twisted Tales from Shakespeare*, and Armour’s views of history in *It All Started with Columbus* (and *Europa and Marx*) are, at the least, startling. *Drug Store Days* is another of the personal reminiscences in a humorous vein.

### Collections of Poetry

Among collections of poetry, there is much to appeal to the adolescent reader, though his is often notoriously allergic to poetry. If he can overcome his uncertainties about poetry—and this is often a good means—he can have a good time with verse. In the lives and times of archy and mehitabel by Don Marquis, archy (who was once a free verse poet whose soul, after death, went into the body of a cockroach) writes of his friends mehitabel, who was once Cleopatra, thirsty king tut, who . . . “if I had my life to live over again I would give dignity the regal razz and hire myself out to work in a brewery,” and warty bliggens, the toad who considers himself the center of the universe. But archy’s interests are far-reaching: his axioms, protests, and songs are top-notch humorous commentary.

Ogden Nash has many volumes of sophisticated, humorous verse that delights both young and not-so-young. *Everyone But Thee and Me* and *Parents Keep Out: Elderly*

*Poems for Younger Readers* are two such collections. Phyllis McGinley’s *The Love Letters of Phyllis McGinley* and *Times Three* and William Cole’s *Humorous Poems for Children*, which in spite of its title has many wonderful poems for the older teen-ager, and *The Fireside Book of Humorous Poetry* are other good collections. Richard Armour’s “high wry spirits,” as Ogden Nash puts it, have produced, in addition to the irreverent essays noted earlier, two volumes of light verse, *Light Armour* and *Nights with Armour*.

James Thurber is one of America’s outstanding humorists. Most high school students are at least exposed (usually in literature anthologies) to some of his fables or to such reminiscences as “The Night the Bed Fell” or “University Days.” While some students will perhaps enjoy only his inimitable cartoons, others may begin to appreciate his genius. *Fables for Our Time, My World—and Welcome to It, My Life and Hard Times, The Wonderful O, and Lanterns & Lances* are some of the Thurber novels and collections of essays.

Some books of laughter for the teen-aged reader we have, but not many. Americans, though they pride themselves on a sense of humor, seem to prefer the spoken word as the vehicle—the joke or the phonograph record. Sometimes it seems as if our very culture militates against the humorous books. Books of “cheerful lunacy, daft and delightful”—to use May Hill Arbuthnot’s phrase—are perhaps fine for children, but must, along with other childish things, be put aside in the serious business of growing up. There is, among many high school students, a very real suspicion of fiction and frivolity—instilled, perhaps unconsciously, by their elders. Telling jokes is an accepted diversion; however, reading books that

merely entertain is something of a waste of time, a commodity Americans value highly. This point Edwin Sauer reiterates (*English in the Secondary School*, Holt, 1961) in his discussion of literature in the high school:

American youngsters are the product of two dominant points of view, the Puritan and the pragmatic, both hostile to frivolity and time-wasting, both suspicious of the indolence of fantasy and make-believe, both uncertain about the claims of the imagination.

Not all teachers and other adults, I am sure, share these sentiments, but there are many—again perhaps unconsciously—who do. There are those who indicate, sometimes with words, sometimes with the not-so-silent language of the raised eyebrow or the shrugged shoulder, their disparagement of the student’s choice of a book just for fun. There are adults who judge quality by the pound—and most books of humor do not, on those scales, weigh much.

### Teen-Age Choices

We end, I think, on a happy note. The adolescent is very much his own man. Teen-agers and young adults have in recent years responded deeply to Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, to Knowles’ *A Separate Peace*, to Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Today the voice that seems to be coming through to them is that of J. R. R. Tolkien, a retired English don, whose trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*, and its “children’s book” predecessor, *The Hobbit*, is another of those amazing—and timeless—combinations of adventure, fantasy, philosophy, and gentle humor. It is heartening, to at least this teacher concerned with young people’s reading, that the stories currently speaking loudly to the young adult—are those of

small people, smaller than dwarves (and they have no beards) but very much larger than lilliputians.



... They are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leathery soles and thick warm hair like the stuff on the heads (which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it.)

With such an antidote to "the Puritan and the pragmatic," with the rise of Tolkien clubs and journals on high school and college campuses across the country, there has been, in some measure, a restoration of delight to young people's reading.

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