

'Get 'em laughing. Get 'em reading.' Gleebooks Talk, 2003

Intro

I'd like to open this talk with a quote from one of the great writers of humour in children's literature. It is Roald Dahl, from his book, *Matilda*:

'Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits?' Miss Honey asked.

'I do,' Matilda said. 'Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh.'

J.A. Mawter

When people meet me for the first time and find out I'm the author of the *So* books - *So Gross!*, *So Feral!* and *So Sick!* with *So Festy!* coming out early next year the usual reaction is, 'You don't look like someone who'd write those kind of books!' And it makes me wonder... What exactly are 'those kind of books'. Do they mean *funny books*? And what am I meant to look like? Firstly, they expect me to be a man. Let me just say, I am not a man. In fact, I've never been one. Maybe I was in a past life, who knows, I could have been Fatty Vaughtin's great, great, great, grandfather?

What else might they be expecting me to be? A great teller of fart jokes? Cockroach in my ear? The closest I get to gross is ear wax and the occasional boogie. I find it really funny that people assume you can only write from personal experience. Experience would mean that unless I've stuffed a jellyfish in my undies or drunk a cup of dog-food then I couldn't possibly write about it.

But I do write about it and I am here to tell you why I think it works. Why humour is a fantastic tool for getting children to read. I'd like to start by telling you how I got into the *So* series.

Hugh's story

At the age of about 10 my son announced that he no longer wanted to read. He no longer liked reading. And it broke my heart. I scoured libraries, bookshops searching for the book that could turn him back to reading. Nothing grabbed him. Until, I borrowed Tim Winton's *The Bugalugs Bum Thief* and that was the day that changed our lives.

My son thought it was hysterically funny and he turned to me and said, I want another book, Mum. I want another book like that. And I looked and I looked and the only author who grabbed him was Paul Jennings. And it got me thinking... Get 'em laughing. Get 'em reading. get 'em reading. And they'll read more.

Humour and Literacy

As yet, I can find no studies that have been done on the use of humour to improve literacy. But I *can* go on personal experience. I have three children, none of whom would I call great readers. Through dogged persistence and by enticing with humorous literature slowly but surely I have won them over to reading. My kids would try to read school texts and it was like wading through sludge. To them, reading was hard work, dosed with failure. What they needed to learn was that reading is fun. I can proudly say that I have turned them around. Today, I have two really good readers and one I'm still working on.

But it's not just my kids. Recently, I received an email from someone in the accounts department at HarperCollins which reads 'Thank you for single-handedly bringing my 10 year old son, Henry, back to reading! He'd always been an on-off reader but over the last 4/5 months has been completely off reading, giving up on any number of different books that I've found to try and ignite the spark again. Then I bought a copy of *So Gross!* and lo and

behold, it grabbed him and he simply couldn't stop reading!! He's finished the other two in record time (caught him still reading one at 11.30 one night) and is champing at the bit for So Festy! It's been wonderful to watch. He's even started voluntarily reading other books, to my amazement. And recommends your books to his friends. Thank you so much – you have done something really special!

Lack of Research

A couple of years ago I was asked to give a talk at the Norman Lindsay Literature Festival. My topic was Humour in Australian Children's Literature and I took this pretty seriously. I started trying to research the area when to my surprise I came up with almost nothing. I contacted Professor John Stephens who teaches Children's Literature at Macquarie University and Dr Suzanne Eggins from the University of NSW and they both said, 'Sorry. Hardly any research has been done on either humour and literature, or humour and literacy.' Although, I am pleased to say, Dr Eggins is trying to rectify this. She is analysing humour in both written and spoken stories and starting to publish her results. How can this be?

Issues versus Humor

We've got this view in our society that the only things 'worthy' of studying are the 'issues' based texts. And issues texts tend to be serious. The more serious the text the more literary credibility it gets. Humorous books have been dismissed as unworthy, with no literary merit. I believe that we should not have this 'issues versus humour' mentality. I believe there is a place for both in children's literature. Moira Robinson wrote a chapter, Humour in Children's Literature, in a book edited by Saxby and Winch called *Give Them Wings: The Experience of Children's Literature*. Robinson

observes that humour is 'the Cinderella in the world of children's literature' which is 'lucky to rate even an occasional chapter or article'.

Reading Humour

Now, this got me thinking. Why is humour so under-valued? And it occurred to me that one of the reasons is because we don't really know how to read humour. Not in terms of reading the signs or the significance of it. Let me explain. A few years ago I had the great fortune to do a Master's Degree in Children's Literature and one of the topics I studied was Picture Books. Having had three children meant I'd read thousands of picture books and I thought I knew all there was to know about them. Boy, was I wrong. The more I delved into the world of Picture Books the better I became at reading them. By reading, I don't only mean the words, I also mean learning to read the significance of things – things like: does the page have a frame or has the frame been broken? White space speaks volumes. Picture texts and written texts have different narratives - sometimes these complement each other but sometimes they don't. Font is important, as is word placement. I could go on. The point I'm trying to make is that I started off thinking I could read a picture book, learnt that I knew almost nothing about them, and then learnt to read them with full understanding of their significance.

I feel that the problem with humour in children's literature is that people haven't learnt to read the signs – hell, they don't even know the signs are there. And if you don't know what you don't know, there is a tendency to dismiss it. It is insignificant, lightweight and unimportant. People like Dr Eiggins and her research are opening the door to an understanding and an appreciation of humour and hopefully highlight the value of humour.

Hierarchy of Humour

What else is so great about humour and how can it help our kids with reading? Humour is extraordinarily diverse. It has a hierarchy of complexity. It ranges from simple word puns, word plays and slapstick to the higher appreciation of irony, satire or parody. This means that a text might have multiple levels of meaning so that your less sophisticated reader will laugh at one thing, whilst your more sophisticated reader will laugh at another. I certainly try to do this in my stories. This means that reluctant readers can share a joke with more sophisticated readers, even if their depth of understanding differs.

In a past life I was a Speech Pathologist. When I was a Speech Pathologist we looked at the neurolinguistic development of language. Basically, this means that as the brain develops in a child, so does their grasp of language. One thing I learnt was that the brain has only developed sufficiently to process the sophisticated language of humour at somewhere between 15 – 18 years of age. This means that learning to appreciate the levels of humour is something that happens along a developmental continuum. What a wonderful tool to use in a class of ranging abilities and development.

Humour relies on Developmental Stage

Given that language appreciation occurs developmentally it is vital to link this with *other* normal stages of child development. Stages such as being fascinated with their bodies (and its secretions) or the stage when children start to question adults, and maybe oppose them. Children love to venture into areas such as rude words or forbidden places like toilets. They love to test out their position in an adult world and will intentionally try to shock.

Moira Robinson agrees that these stages: 1) of fascination with bodily functions; 2) of understanding sex roles; and 3) of asserting their independence over adults are NORMAL and she goes on to make this fascinating point... 'it is perhaps the hardest stage for adults to recall.' And I would add, 'and thus appreciate.' In fact she takes this further and states that "Few writers can capture this stage of silliness".

This difficulty that adults have was highlighted to me in Book Week. I visited a school in Sydney's west. The day before I was due to visit I spoke to the librarian who warned me that I would have to tone down my language. That a teacher had been reading one of my stories to her class and was so shocked and horrified by a word that she'd had to change. The librarian even sent a note out to teachers warning them that this author's language is offensive. When I asked what the horrifying word had been the answer was 'penis'. Penis. We're talking the correct anatomical name for this part of the body, not some derogatory slang word. I ask you? Who has the problem here? It's not the children. And it begs the question... What on earth did that teacher substitute for penis? A winkie? A Pee Pee? A little flower?

Children Demand Humour

Which leads me to another point. In the past there were far more serious books published than humorous books. Why? One reason is that I believe serious books are easier to write. It is easy to write the sad or tragic. Tragedy is something we all know. We're good at doing tragedy. Humour, however, is more subjective. It's more elusive. It can have a dark side. Many authors will tell you it is much, much harder to write. Paul Jennings confesses that in the Un series less than half his stories are funny – because funny is too damn hard to write.

Why else have so few humorous books been published? Adults were the ones who bought the books and adults were the ones who demanded that they be serious. Learning and books had to be taken seriously so *serious* they would be. Humour was frivolous. However, in the last 15 – 20 years we've seen a change taking place. Children are now setting the demand. Authors like Paul Jennings, Moya Simons, Duncan and John have opened up the world of humour for children.

Humour that Heals

I'd like to finish by saying that humour has a healing force. People feel good when they laugh. Anything that creates laughter is good by me. In 1994 Geoffrey McSkimming gave a talk at the Third Children's Literature Conference in Australia and I'd like to quote some of it:

"A sustained laugh is good for blood pressure, will lower heart rate, can reduce pain and boost immunity."

"Research has shown that, on average, young children laugh about 400 times a day, but by the time they reach adulthood this has been reduced to about 15 times a day."

"This is tragic."

Summary

I'd just like to finish with this. Humour appeals to all kids. But it especially appeals to kids who are reluctant to read. Try it. I'm sure you'll be pleased with the results.