

The Humour of So Sick! And So Festy!
by J.A. Mawter

Functions of Humour

1) To increase realism.

Humans use humour to bond, to relieve tension and to heal. No matter how bad a situation is, someone will make light of it. Characters will do this, also. When times are tough, they will make light of it, joke their way out of it. For example: Lenny in Tales from the Freezer, Chapter Two (So Festy!)

2) To Increase/Relieve Tension

Unrelenting tension loses its power for the reader. Humour can break the tension giving the reader the opportunity to relax and lower their guard. The writer can then turn up the heat again.

For example: The scene between Cal and Hayley in Footrot Fair, Chapter Three (So Sick!)

3) To Increase Brand Identification

Popular characters and authors may be popular because of their sense of humour. Readers like spending time with them as a sense of humour is a likeable character trait.

For Example: Ollie and Kris, the narrator, in Jellyfish Undies (So Sick!) appear again in And They're off (So Grotty!) [For publication in August 2004].

4) Humour Appeals to all readers, particularly to the reluctant reader.

From the most simple of puns to the most sophisticated satire there is a type of humour that will appeal.

For example: The multiple jokes in the short scene at the beginning of Chapter Four in The Smelling Bee (So Sick!) when Angus is showing off with all the difficult words on his spelling list. Madeline makes a joke that a more sophisticated reader will get, then Jake puts himself down in a way that less sophisticated readers will also get.

5) Humour is healing

People feel good when they laugh. It is shown to lower blood pressure, lower heart rate, reduce pain and boost immunity. Children laugh up to 400 times a day. Adults laugh only 15 times a day. This is tragic.

Verbal Humour

There are many ways to talk funny.

1) Puns

For example: 1) The fictional author's names in *The Fantastic Fart Factory* (So Festy!) are Freia Imogen Nayshun, Fay Bull, and Les Tella Tale and; 2) When Karl calls his Aunty, Gladys Thursday, in *Pee Pee Poo*, Chapter Three (So Sick!)

2) Double meanings

For example: Mr Epeler, the teacher, in *The Smelling Bee* (So Sick!). The word épeler in french, means 'to spell'.

3) Word Plays

For example: 1) The dead cat word game between Lenny and Max in *Tales From the Freezer*, Chapter Two (So Festy!) and; 2) when Jake uses the sentences 'Today I'll teach Angus niceness. Angus rarely uses manners.' to cue himself how to spell in *The Smelling Bee*, Chapter Six (So Sick!)

4) Jokes

For Example: 1) When Hayley cracks a joke with Cal in *Footrot Fair*, Chapter Six (So Sick!) and; 2) Lenny's parting shot to the woman on the bus in *Tales from the Freezer*, Chapter Three (So Festy!)

5) Internal Dialogue: especially if the character is unable to speak their mind

For example: 1) When Jake does not understand Francesca's joke in *The Smelling Bee*, Chapter Four (So Sick!) and; 2) Ned throughout *A Real Dogs Dinner* (So Festy!)

6) A character may be the 'straight man' for the resident wit.

For example: Max is the straight man for Lenny in *Tales from the Freezer* (So Festy!)

7) Put-downs

For example: 1) Mitch in *Grotty Chops and Melon Butt Get a Life* gets stuck with the name Melon Butt, Chapter One (So Festy!) and; 2) When Foreman Phat tells Fogbottom he knows he's innocent because he isn't 'clever enough

to dismantle the F-Start Combustion Machine' in *The Fantastic Fart Factory*, Chapter Two (So Festy!)

8) Anecdotes eg about your first kiss

For example: In *Jellyfish Undies*, Chapter Four, when Kris and Ollie are reminiscing about the model robot they made (So Sick!).

9) Taboo language

For example: 1) the names Flutterbum and Fogbottom in *The Fantastic Fart Factory* (So Festy!) and; 2) in *The Smelling Bee*, Chapter One, when Jake can't remember the word *Amorphophallus titanum* and he says 'I can't even remember the word, let alone spell it. Something to do with phallus. Or was that tit?' (So Sick!)

10) Exaggeration or understatement ie stretching or downplaying the truth.

For example: When Ned and Baxter are talking in *A Real Dog's Dinner*, Chapter Four, and Baxter comments that his mum will kill him. Ned replies, 'My mum'll kill me, then boil me in oil.'

11) Substitution eg Homework is fun

For example: Daniel makes a comment about Cal's bad feet in *Footrot Fair*, Chapter Two, 'You can't ask Hayley for a flipper race with hoofs like that.' (So Sick!)

12) Ridicule of adults

For example: Mr Epeler's severe body odour in *The Smelling Bee* (So Sick!) - 'That armpit's ripe for nuclear fusion'.

13) Ridicule of society

For example; FlatuLance's quest for power in *The Fantastic Fart Factory*, Chapter Six, 'I wanted to be prince of FairyLand' (So Festy!)

14) Euphemisms. This is the substitution of a mild or less negative word or phrase for a harsh or blunt one. Eg to 'pass away' instead of 'die'.

For example: 1) When Lenny calls the dead body, Mr Stiffy, in *Tales from the Freezer*, Chapter One (So Festy!) and; 2) when Lenny and Max think of all the ways you could describe a dead cat in Chapter Two, *Tales from the Freezer*.

15) Asides A brief speech in which a character turns from the person being addressed to speak directly to the audience; a dramatic device for letting

the audience know what a character is really thinking of feeling as opposed to what the character pretends to think or feel.

For example: The narrator in *The Smelling Bee* (*So Sick!*).

16) **Oxymoron** The juxtaposition of two contradictory ideas eg sweet sorrow, original copy.

For Example: Perfume power in *The Smelling Bee* (*So Sick!*).

Situational Humour

Examples of situational humour include:

1) Where the writer upsets the reader's expectations eg the teacher farts. Or where the writer sets up an expectation then writes a surprise ending. An element of surprise is vital to humour. You can have enduring tragedy but not enduring surprise or an enduring joke.

For example: All the endings in *So Sick!* And *So Festy!*

2) Satire ie. cutting humour which sets out to show what's wrong with the world. It has a moral point of view, eg cynicism.

For example: the corruption of a society by greed and power in *The Fantastic Fart Factory* (*So Festy!*)

3) Parody. This is an imitation of a work of an author with the idea of ridiculing the author, their work or ideals.

For example, the parodying of the nursery rhyme, *Hot Cross Buns* with *Hot Cross Bums* in *So Festy!*

4) Topical humour or 'in' jokes. This involves parodying or satirising a specific subject of current interest. This is intentionally avoided by J.A.

Mawter for fear of 'dating' the work.

5) Slapstick ie one thing leads to another which leads to another. It is a very visual form of humour.

For example: 1) many scenes from *A Real Dog's Dinner* (*So Festy!*) and: 2) the incident between Hamish and Luke and Zac at the fair in *Pee Pee Poo*, Chapter Five (*So Sick!*)

6) Absurdities

For example: Reece throwing up in Ned's lap after Baxter told him to 'Sick 'im' in *A Real Dog's Dinner*, Chapter Two (*So Festy!*)

7) Incongruities

For example: A Factory which makes farts and puts them back into bottoms in *The Fantastic Fart Factory* (So Festy!)

8) Human predicaments eg getting a huge pimple on a first date

For example: 1) Cal's tinea in *Footrot Fair* (So Sick!) and; 2) Jake and Amy's spelling difficulties in *The Smelling Bee* (So Sick!)

9) Irony. Can be either verbal or situational. It is a mode of expression conveying a reality different from, and usually opposite to, appearances or expectation. Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony. It expresses disapproval in the guise of praise.

For Example: When Angus's *prize* in *The Smelling Bee*, Chapter Six, almost kills him (So Sick!).

10) Burlesque. This is a work designed to ridicule a style, literary form or a subject matter by either exalting the trivial or trivialising the exalted. It is often derisive. The tragedy can easily be burlesqued.

For example: Farts have been exalted in *The Fantastic Fart Factory* (So Festy!)

11) Comic Relief This is humour that is used to lighten the tension in a moment of conflict or turmoil. Used a lot in *Tales From the Freezer* (So Festy!).

Problems When Writing Humour**Humour for children should not be didactic**

This occurs when the adult writer tries to impart a moral lesson to the reader. It is often heavy handed.

Humour should not be a comedy routine.

If you use too much humour it sounds like a stand-up comedy routine full of one-liners. There is no story. One character cannot solely provide the humour. This character will be two dimensional and the reader will always be waiting for his/her punch line.

Humour Does Not Mean Telling Jokes

Jokes are meant to be spoken and often fall flat on the printed page.

Humour Should Not be Offensive

Humour is subjective. What one person thinks is hysterically funny another will find deranged. Be aware of what is socially and culturally acceptable.

Humour is seen as 'lightweight' and unworthy of literary merit.

Our society places great value on 'issues' based texts and issues tend to be serious. The more serious the text the more literary credibility it gets.

Our society has not learned to read and appreciate humour

When reading a text we learn to read the signs or significance in the text. For example, in picture books, we learn the power of white space or a broken frame. I believe that because humour is undervalued it has not been adequately researched. We don't know how to read the signs. In fact, most people don't even realise that the signs are there. What we don't understand we dismiss. I feel if people learnt to break down a humorous text, if they really learnt to read it, they would develop a deep admiration for the complexity of humour and the skill of the writer.

Humour relies on the developmental stage of the reader.

Learning to process the sophisticated language of humour does not fully develop till 15 – 18 years of age. It follows the developmental stages of language mastery. Thus humour is linked to the normal development of the child. Junior readers are fascinated with the body and its secretions, they love to venture into rude or forbidden territories (like toilets or sexuality), they love to question adults and maybe even oppose them. They like to test their position in an adult world and sometimes intentionally shock.

A writer must respect these developmental stages and view them as normal. Adult readers have often forgotten or repressed this stage in their development and shun it, judging literature that deals with these issues as worthless or trivial. In fact, very few adult writers can remember or capture this stage of pure silliness.

For young adults who are developing a sense of self and their place in the world their humour tends to be self-deprecatory.

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