

## Sydney Writers' Festival, May 2005

### Writing for Young People

I came to writing in late 1996 after a career as a speech pathologist specialising in severe neurological impairment. When I first started writing and met new people they'd ask me 'What do you do?' and I'd answer, 'I'm a writer,' which immediately triggered, 'Are you published?' As soon as they heard the word, 'No,' their eyes would glaze over. Until one magical day in the year 2000 when I could answer, 'Yes.' This always led to the question, 'So what do you write?' When I'd say, 'Fiction,' you could see me rise in their barometer of esteem. But if I added, 'Children's fiction' I could see myself sliding down that barometer. When I clarified this with, 'Humorous children's fiction' I'd slide down further. But when I dared to confess to writing gross humorous children's fiction I slid off the barometer and became something that they'd like to scrape off their shoe.

Now this was an interesting phenomenon and one that puzzled me. After all, today's catch-cry is, 'Why can't we get our kids to read?' and the fact of the matter is, 'You can.' But you have to find the right text. Mine may not be the right books for all, but they are definitely right for some. Especially reluctant readers, especially boys. Every letter or email I receive starts with, 'I hate reading but I love your books.'

All authors can describe the thrill of holding their first book, of seeing it on the bookshelves and reading their first review. For my first review the stories in *So Gross!* were described as 'execrable' and the reviewer went on to add 'J.A. Mawter seems at one with her characters'. It was a shock to be told I was evil, a vile abomination, someone utterly detestable. And there's been an element of that in many of my adult reviews. So, it got me thinking, why does gross humour for kids trigger such a negative reaction from some adults? After much reading and research I've written a paper *Humour in Literature: Why Gross Works for Kids* which can be found at [jenimawter.com](http://jenimawter.com).

There's surprisingly very little written about humour in literature. It's been dismissed as 'lightweight' and trivial whilst the tragedy has been exalted. Yet all writers of humour will tell you, you can't separate the two:

The world is a tragedy to those who feel, but a comedy to those who think.

**Horace Walpole (1717 – 1797)**

Humour is a way of saying something serious.

**T.S. Eliot (1888 – 1965)**

Comedy is simply a funny way of being serious.

**Peter Ustinov ( 1921 – 2004)**

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into a sewer and die.

**Mel Brooks (1926 - )**

Why is humour in literature so undervalued? It's said that all authors can write something sad or tragic but very few authors can write something that can make us laugh. Tragedy speaks to every person no matter what their age, sex, culture. All humans are moved by death, disease and disaster. To a certain extent, tragedy is predictable. Humour is not predictable. It relies on surprise. It relies on logic being suspended. It's not familiar and thus not comforting, in fact it's confronting and because of this many adults shy away.

Writers of humour for kids are the only resource I know that defy the laws of supply and demand, where the less there are of them, the less they are valued. I was chatting about this to John Larkin one day and he came up with an interesting theory. He said the reason that humour is not valued is because Shakespeare could not write it well - that his tragedies were by far superior to his comedies.

It was only as recent as 2003 that America announced the first award to honour humorous work in children's literature - The Sid Fleischman Award. I know of no such award for humorous children's literature in Australia.

Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenberg, editors of *A Cultural History of Humour. From Antiquity to the Present day* (1997) shed some light on this matter. Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC) was perhaps the first to recognise that tragedy is not superior to comedy. He said:

Humour is the only test of gravity and gravity of humour; for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit.

Unfortunately for us the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* (350 B.C.E.), which concentrated on comedy and laughter, was lost, leaving only the volumes on tragedy. We have built our understanding of the world and art on Aristotle's *Poetics* minus his theory of comedy.

After Aristotle we can jump to Cicero who in 55 B.C. discussed humour in an elaborate and systematic way in *De oratore*. This led to breakthroughs in the Roman vocabulary with words such as *facetiae*, meaning 'wittiness' or 'joke' appearing. The English originally derived the word 'humour' from the French word, *humeur*, which means the four main fluids of the body – blood, bile, black bile and phlegm which are right up my alley.

Bremmer and Roodenburg point out that laughter may have begun as an aggressive display of bearing the teeth. In humorous children's literature there is the mocking of authority and this subversive laughter may be seen by some adults as an act of aggression. No authority figure escapes. Moira Robinson calls this Defiance Humour. Boys especially like defiance humour. They love the yucky stuff, the more the better. One component of gross humour is scatological humour, the mockery of the secretions of the human body.

Plank in his study, *The Psycho-Social Bases of Scatological Humor: The Unmasking of the Self*, says that scatological humour removes the props by which the self attempts to create and control its image. When we alter clothing, privacy, secrecy, composition of the face, and self-control it shows humans as being vulnerable and less than perfect. Many adults can't cope with this. Jonathan Swift alludes to this in his poems 'Strephon and Chloe' (1734) and 'Cassinus and Peter' (1734) when the characters have to relieve themselves romantic purity is shattered.

Abu Hassan from the *Arabian Nights* broke wind during his marriage feast causing Abu to be exiled in shame and give up his bride, his wealth and his native city.

Moira Robinson explains that in the tragedy of the classics we see the collapse of a noble person who is nearly perfect but is marred by one fatal flaw. But in comedy we see survival of the individual – the ordinary person, with warts, bad breath, pimples and all. June Factor recognises that individuals are not perfect and she cautions that humour that shows this is vital. She says, 'Such a perspective is an essential antidote to hubris, the dangerous pride that sets human life on a pinnacle of perfectibility and invulnerability.' (pp 155 – 156).

Kid's have an innate ability to sense this hubris in adults and an almost universal determination to pull it down.

This leads me to the area of censorship. When the Brothers Grimm started to collect folktales, they deliberately omitted jests and comic stories, concentrating instead on the more innocent genres of legends and fairy tales. A huge part of children's literature and folklore was denied and as Bremmer and Roodenburg point out: 'We are still trying to fill that gap.' When June Factor studied children's humour and folklore she found that ... until recently almost all English-language collectors of children's folklore omitted humour from their compilations (p 161).

Today, censorship of humorous texts continues when:

- teachers and librarians avoid the use of humorous texts or chose 'issues' over 'humorous' texts
- academics ignore them
- notable literary journals and magazines choose not to review or discuss them
- parents choose not to buy them

- Booksellers either choose not to stock the books, or if they do stock them, they may not promote them.

Prior to the publication of Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* in 1918 Australian children's books were didactic but Lindsay showed us kids could read for pure joy. Maurice Saxby has a cautionary word for those who choose to ignore reading for joy. He says: 'In striving for political correctness it is possible to become either strident or so earnest as to be dull.'

It's well-known that the development of a sense of humour parallels the intellectual and emotional development of the child. June Factor points out that just as children play with marbles, balls and dolls, they also play with ideas – what she calls 'linguistic playfulness' (p 170). They deliberately separate themselves using codes, nicknames, passwords, word plays, puns, and jokes that are not meant to be accessible to adults.

Roald Dahl was a master at writing this with *The BFG's* 'snozzcumbers' and 'froboscottle' that make you 'whizzpop'. Paul Jennings is another. And so is the brilliant Raymond Briggs. In his book *Father Christmas* (1973) the scene of Santa sitting on a dunny muttering to himself, 'I hate winter' is priceless.

Last year Dr John Foster, asked facetiously in an ASLA paper, *How many more bum jokes can we stand?* In reference to gross children's humour he states, 'Perhaps in fact, the popularity of these works makes as strong a statement about Australia in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century as it does about the children who like to read about bums' (p 118). I would put it to John Foster that it makes no such statement at all, as this type of children's humour has been round for a very long time and is found around the world. In the UK there's Turner's *The Day I Fell Down the Toilet*; in the US Collett's *Potty Poems to Power Your Pants* and Viska's *Dan Dann the Dunnyman* and who can forget Holzwarth and Erlbruch's *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew it was None of his Business*.

Gross humour in Australian children's literature appeared in the 70's with Michael Dugan's *Stuff and Nonsense* (1974) and in the 80s June Factor's *Far Out, Brussels Sprout!* (1983); *All Right, Vegemite!* (1985); *Unreal, Banana Peel!* (1986) and *Real Keen Baked Bean!* (1989); And also in Jane Covernton and Craig Smith's *Putrid Poems* (1985); *Petrifying poems* (1986) and *Vile Verse* (1988); and also in Doug MacLeod's hilarious *Sister Madge's Book of Nuns* (1986). And, of course, I must make mention of Paul Jennings and Andy Griffiths.

Now, if you or a child you know would like to read stories about chewed spew, blue farts, a boogie collection, cockroaches, black poo, a bottled baby, putrid pickings, death breath, goop soup, jellyfish undies, foot rot, pigeon poo, B.O, morgues, a boy who thinks he's a dog, bed-wetting, smelly feet, cheese races, dinosaur dung, a human teeth collection, a quest to find where babies come from or how to deal with an incontinent baby brother then I've got the books for you!

Thank you.