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Serious Things
Tamara J. Hinckley

I was probably five years old when the term "sense of humor" entered my vocabulary. The occasion was our pre-Christmas decorating day, and when my mother pulled the creche out of its storage box, I begged her to let me set it up.

"Oh, I don't know..." she hesitated, and looked at me appraisingly. Of course I positively yearned for the privilege once she expressed doubt. I decided to plead my case: "Oh, please, Mama! I can do it! I have a sense of humor!"

My mother didn't often laugh at me, but that one caught her off-guard. She had to leave the room, and I was left to wonder which "sense" I'd really meant, and whether I actually did have a sense of humor, whatever that was.

Decades later, I still sometimes wonder, especially when I find everyone around me laughing, or worse, when I find myself doing a whoop-and-snort solo. Hence I've reflected, over the years, not only upon the mechanics of humor but also upon its value.

What makes something funny? And why does some humor fail? Why do I laugh just remembering books like The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash (Trinka Hakes Noble) and Stanley and Rhoda (Rosemary Wells)? And why are the unfunny books so utterly forgettable?

For one thing, successful humor relies at least partly on the reader's experience. Thus we can have pre-schoolers laughing at Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs, second-graders hooting at knock-knock jokes, and middle-graders chortling through Superfudge. The reason some books have a wider appeal is that they subtly play on adult experience while simultaneously entertaining children. To children, the hilarity in Jimmy's Boa, for instance, is in the fantastic situations Noble describes and Kellogg illustrates, while to adults it's in the method of presentation:

"How was your class trip to the farm?"
"Oh...boring...kind of dull...until the cow started crying."
"A cow...crying?"
"Yeah, you see, a haystack fell on her."
"But a haystack doesn't just fall over."
"It does if a farmer crashes into it with his tractor."
"Oh, come on, a farmer wouldn't do that."
"He would if he were too busy yelling at the pigs to get off our school bus."
"What were the pigs doing on the bus?"
"Eating our lunches."
"Why were they eating your lunches?"
"Because we threw their corn at each other, and they didn't have anything else to eat."
"Well, that makes sense, but why were you throwing corn?"
"Because we ran out of eggs."
"Out of eggs? Why were you throwing eggs?"
"Because of the boa constrictor..."

It's a parent's nightmare: a slightly exaggerated version of life with an eight-year-old.

Most good humor has its roots in everyday life, even in painful experiences. As William Wilson says, "We laugh most loudly at the things we feel most deeply" (Sunstone, January 1986). Of course, this sort of wit can cut both ways and easily reverts to pain. When that happens, humor fails (at best) or damages people (at worst). An example of its proper use, however, is in Stotan! by Chris Crutcher (reviewed in this edition of Children's Book Review). The boys of the high school swim team are baring their souls to each other during a sleep-over, and when the atmosphere gets too heavy, one of them saves the evening with a story about a universal teenage horror: zits.

"You guys remember Melissa. Already a varsity cheerleader, she was Sophomore Class President, Frost High School Carnival Queen and carried a 4.0 grade average, with a reputation so pristine you felt the stabbing, twisting saber of guilt the moment you tried to sneak her into one of your fantasies. More than once she turned me into a one-man Ship of Fools with a smile or a nod that wasn't even meant for me. A curious mixture of tomboy and princess, those subtle dimples, long brown hair and light blue eyes just made you ache."

Jeff let out big air. "This isn't a Stotan story," he said. "This is disgusting."  

Lion went on as if Jeff hadn't spoken. "I wanted her. But to have her, to really have her; to shroud her in the purple-and-gold letter sweater I had yet to earn; to have my class ring wrapped in adhesive tape coated with fingernail polish so it would fit her delicate finger; to meet daily at Dolly's for a chocolate Coke; well, that would have been what you call your amazing come-from-behind victory."

"That would have been an amazing come-from-way-behind victory," Jeff said.

"Whatever," Lion said. "Anyway, a few nights before the Football Frolics dance up at the gym, during which I had promised myself to ask her to dance — maybe even a slow one — I was visited upon by the first of a forest of pimples yet to come. This wasn't an advance man, an insignificant pimple scout sent ahead to determine whether this peach-fuzz frontier could support a whole pimple nation. This was Sitting Bull. This pimple was red and sore and angry and given to harmonic tremors. Friends asked if I were growing another head. Enemies said it must be my date to the dance. This was a big zit."
"I considered flying down to some obscure Central or South American country where it's possible to have an illegal alien growing on your face surgically removed, but decided against it, because I was fortunate in those days to count among my friends one Walker Dupree, a promising young swimmer and budding sports-medicine specialist, ready with a quick remedy for my leprous condition."

I was already laughing — I knew this story. "Really," I said, "it worked for me."

It was as if I hadn't spoken — or didn't exist. "After close examination," he went on, "my friend Walker recommended Coke-bottle treatment. 'I beat it to death with a Coke bottle?' I gasped, then considered it. 'That might work."

"But Walker revealed to me a nearly invisible scar from a boil on his right calf that he had treated with this method just three days earlier."

"That night, with my parents finally tucked away in their beds, I closed myself in the kitchen, quietly boiled a Coke bottle in water and deposited a wet washrag in the freezer. When the water came to a rolling boil and the rag was nearly stiff, I carefully removed the bottle with tongs, wrapped it in the freezing washrag and slipped the piping-hot mouth over the mountainous zit — the idea being that as the air inside cooled and contracted, it would suck the boiling core of the Vesuvian blemish whappo! right into the bottle, rendering it dormant and harmless.

"It didn't come off as advertised."

I said, "You must not have done it right."

"As the air inside the bottle contracted," Lion continued, ignoring me, "my forehead drew tighter and tighter; my eyes bulged. The pimple didn't pop; just extended like a throbbing finger deeper and deeper into the neck of the bottle. It wasn't working! I pulled on the bottle to remove it, but it was sucking my face off my head. I thought, 'I'm going to have to wear this bottle to the dance. Melissa won't be impressed.'"

"With that horrifying fate in mind, I gripped the bottle in both hands, closed my eyes, gritted my teeth and yanked. It popped free with the sound of two anteaters kissing in an echo chamber.

"Tremendous relief washed over me as I sank to the kitchen floor. Given the alternative, I was more than happy to escort the throbbing pustule to the Football Frolics."
"But in the bathroom I gazed into the mirror and changed my mind. The mouth of the bottle had left a deep purple ring around the angry sore, forming a perfect three-dimensional bull's-eye right in the middle of my head.

"At the dance, after an infinity of I'll-ask-her-for-the-next-slow-ones, I screwed up the courage to do just that, and we glided across the dimly lit dance floor beneath the purple-and-gold crepe-paper streamers, two jerky steps forward, one jerky step back, at arm's length.

"Melissa peered deeply into my eyes. 'Is that a corn plaster on your forehead?' she asked romantically.

"I acknowledged that it was. 'I was showing some of the football players how to do a head spear,' I said, 'and drove a loose rivet in the helmet I'd borrowed into my forehead. No big deal.'

"That must've hurt,' she said, nodding. 'It got you right on that monstrous pimple.'"

Effective humor, whether verbal or visual, not only capitalizes on real-life experience but also employs the surprise factor — which includes the ludicrous, the incongruous, the exaggerated, and the ridiculous, as well as the unexpected. "The surprise in our laughter," says one children's author, "is like the bounce in a ball... It is the bounce our feelings take when we come up against a funny surprise. Laughing... [is] a reflex that happens naturally. We don't have to work at laughter." (A. A. Redpath, Why Do We Laugh? Creative Education, Inc., 1981.)

It's the naturalness of laughter that intrigues me most, and the universality of humor makes me believe it must be as crucial to life as is love. In fact, humor and love are related in at least one way; namely, that the ability to laugh can lead to love. One of my college professors explained this relationship in the context of culture shock: the first stage of shock when a person arrives in a foreign country is dazzlement — everything is beautiful, thrilling, fascinating; the second stage is disillusionment, when reality creeps in and homesickness hits; and the third stage, strangely enough, is humor, when the transplanted person starts learning to laugh at himself and his situation. "Once you begin making jokes about the cockroaches," he said, "you're almost home." From the humor stage, you can step out of culture shock altogether — into acceptance and love.

The process of dazzlement—disillusionment—humor—love applies to more than culture shock, however. It applies just as well to such things as religious conversion, marriage, and life. That's why it's so important to avoid getting stuck in the "disillusioned" phase. And good humor is the key to a way out. The emphasis on good is necessary, because bad humor — the painful, damaging sort — leads nowhere and is nothing but a trap. Rather than leading out of disillusionment, it only leads further in, ending in a downward spiral of cynicism and bitterness. Good humor brings healing and joy, not more pain and despair.
Thus the right kind of humor in literature (especially in adolescent literature, for teenagers are frequently in the "disillusioned" stage of life shock) has a major role to play in teaching young people how to live and how to love living, in teaching them — and us — that the way out of a painful situation may be in finding something to laugh at, either in the situation or in ourselves. After all, only those who have learned to laugh at themselves can be trusted with serious things.

Suggested books
(At least some of us think they're funny)

Barrett, Judi. *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs.* (Pre-2)
The town of Chewandswallow routinely has fantastic weather, but then something goes wrong.

Crowe, Robert L. *Clyde Monster.* (Pre-3)
A common childhood fear is laid to rest by pulling a literary switch: Clyde is a monster-child who's afraid of humans.

Mayer, Mercer. *There's a Nightmare in My Closet.* (Pre-2)
Another book dealing with a young boy's fear of monsters, with a funny twist at the end of the story.

Sadler, Marilyn. *Alistair's Elephant.* (Pre-2)
Alistair is followed home by a larger-than-average stray animal.

Wells, Rosemary. *Stanley and Rhoda, Max* books, *Peabody,* etc. (Pre-4)
Wells's picture books are classics, capitalizing on sibling relations. (I suspect they're really for adults.)

Noble, Trinka Hakes, *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash, Jimmy's Boa Bounces Back.* (3-5)
A class trip to the farm loses most of its boredom when Jimmy's boa escapes. The illustrations by Steven Kellogg are at least half the fun.
Pinkwater, Daniel, Alan Mendelsohn, Boy From Mars; The Blue Moose; Fat Men from Space; The Snarkout Boys and the Baconburg Horror; I Was a Second-Grade Werewolf; and countless others. (2-8, depending on title)

If you're into wacked-out humor, with an undercurrent of friendly werewolves, vampires, and space invaders, Pinkwater is your man. Definitely an original.

Sutton, Jane. Me and the Weirdos. (4-7)

Cindy is embarrassed to have "weird" parents, until she learns to appreciate them.

Hughes, Dean. Honestly, Myron. (5-8)

Myron vows to be totally honest at all times, and is surprised at the hostility such behavior inspires in others.

Fitzgerald, John D. The Great Brain. (6-9)

An autobiographical novel about three brothers growing up in a small, southern Utah town. One of them, Tom, is a mastermind con-man who leads his little brother into some hilarious adventures.

Konigsburg, E. L. George; About the B'nai Bagels; many others. (7-10)

Well-written, witty Jewish humor that appeals to a wide audience.

Upson, William Hazlett. Alexander Botts. (9+)

Originally short stories published in The Saturday Evening Post, these letters from an egotistical "Earthworm" tractor salesman are undiscovered gems. We had a teenager who never read anything but mechanical journals — until he met Botts.

Herriot, James. All Things Bright and Beautiful; All Creatures Great and Small; etc. (10+)

Everyone knows the Yorkshire vet, but we don't usually think of his books as humor for teens. A fringe benefit of reading Herriot is a tasteful sex education (albeit nothing that would shock a farm kid).

McManus, Patrick. A Fine and Pleasant Misery; They Shoot Canoes, Don't They? etc. (9+)

McManus is also a well-known humorist, but not always recommended to teenagers. His is the humor of the great outdoors, just as Erma Bombeck's is the humor of the great indoors.