Reader/listener response to humour in children's books

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It is said that the producers of Sesame Street, accused of appealing to an adult sense of humour, replied that this was precisely their intention. They wanted parents to watch and share the program with their children, so they set out to entertain both audiences. Similarly, all who have read stories to children know that, unless both parties are enjoying the experience, the results are disappointing. Now, it is almost an axiom among critics of children's literature that the well-written children's book will continue to be enjoyed by the adult,[1] and in many instances the same features appeal to both age levels. But new factors can also come into play. And in the case of humorous books these often take the form of comments, allusions, and jokes aimed with a wink at the adult reader, over the child listener's head as it were. An example might be the disappearance of "the Equinoxes, because the Precession had preceded according to precedent," or the crocodile who wept "crocodile tears," in Kipling's "The elephant's child."[2] And it is this awareness on the author's part of two audiences (or "narratees") that I wish to examine, together with the function of role of comedy in broader terms, in A.A. Milne's two Winnie-the Pooh books, E.B. White's *Charlotte's web*, and Mordecai Richler's *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang.*

This "bifocal" quality is probably more apparent in Milne's work than in that of either of the other authors. In saying this, I do not for a moment wish to imply that there is no humour in Milne which appeals in the first place to the child, though equally to the adult. Pooh with his head in a honey jar at the bottom of his own heffalump trap, and Piglet mistaking him for a heffalump; Tigger able to climb trees but discovering that coming down is another matter; Rabbit setting out to "unbounce" Tigger by losing him and then magnanimously finding him again, but getting lost himself and being found by Tigger: these are clearly situations with a comic or ironic twist that both children and adults can readily respond ot. The word "heffalump," however, though almost a part of the language now, is one of a number of such misspellings and mispronunciations ("jagular," "masturshalum," "haycorn") which were clearly meant to appeal to a rather condescending adult sense of humour. Similarly, the broken sign outside Piglet's house bearing his grandfather's name ("TRESPASSERS W...short for

Trespassers Will, which was short for Trespassers William...two names in case he lost one — Trespassers after an uncle, and William after Trespassers")[3] gives rise to word play which few child listeners will understand or find funny.

Much of the verbal humour throughout both books is supplied by Eeyore, and is so cynically sarcastic in tone that many young children will not get the point at a first hearing. Presumably they will be puzzled or even worried, as is Pooh, when Piglet suggests, as a way of rescuing Tigger from the tree he has climbed, "that if Eeyore stood at the bottom of the tree, and if Pooh stood on Eeyore's back, and if I stood on Pooh's shoulders — " "And if Eeyore's back snapped suddenly, then we could all laugh. Ha ha! Amusing in a quiet way," said Eeyore, "but not really helpful." "Well," said Piglet meekly, "*I* thought — " "Would it break your back, Eeyore?" asked Pooh, very much surprised. "That's what would be so interesting, Pooh. Not being quite sure till afterwards."[4]

As things turn out, Eeyore holds one corner of Christopher Robin's coat to help make a kind of trampoline for Tigger to jump into, and naturally ends up at the bottom of the resulting pile of bodies. When he has been picked up and dusted down, he asks after Tigger and is assured he is fine — in fact, "feeling bouncy again already." Whereupon Eeyore adds, to the likely bemusement of most children, "Well, just thank him for me" (*HPC* 72).

Cumulatively, however, such remarks establish Eeyore's character for what it is: that of a misanthropic author of his own isolation and misfortunes, yet somehow gaining if not always deserving our sympathy. And such characterization, for the most part implicit in the action and dialogue, is above all what sets these books apart from most others for the same age range. One of the best multiple examples of this comes near the end of *The house at Pooh Corner*, when Owl's house has blown down, and Eeyore with uncharacteristic energy but characteristic insensitivity has "found" a replacement — Piglet's house. When he unveils his discovery to Christopher Robin, Pooh and Piglet, and when Piglet has nobly (and timidly) agreed that it is "just the house for Owl," and when Christopher Robin is desperately searching for a way out of this delicate situation by asking Piglet what he would do if his house blew down, it is Pooh who comes to the rescue. "He'd come and live with me, wouldn't you, Piglet?" (*HPC*, 160-1).

In the same kind of way, when Rabbit asks Owl for his opinion on a cryptic note Christopher Robin has left pinned to his door, we are left to deduce, from the high comedy of Owl's attempts to get Rabbit to reveal the contents of the almost identical note left the previous day, that Owl cannot read the note (*HPC*, 79-81). Similarly, we watch Piglet join Pooh for a walk in the snow, and the pair of them track first a woozle, then two woozles, then two woozles and a wizzle, round and round the spinney where Piglet

lives (*WP*, 35-43). Or we witness them move a pile of sticks from the windward to the lee side of a wood in order to build a house for Eeyore, and then overhear Eeyore's puzzlement that the house he has recently built himself has disappeared, only to reappear in even better shape on the opposite side of the wood (*HPC*, 14-20). In none of these incidents is the comedy of the situation made fully explicit; in all of them the reader/listener is invited to be abreast of the narrator, if not somewhat ahead of him, in sensing what is happening.

Clearly in the above instances young children are less likely than adults to be fully aware, first time round, of the comedy and all its implications. But on subsequent hearings they will be able to hug themselves with glee, knowing who it is that Pooh and Piglet are tracking, or why Owl is so eager to know what was in the other note. Comedy becomes a learning experience, as children are helped to perceive incongruities (Owl the wise one cannot read) or absurdities (of course if you walk in a circle in the snow you will....), and to foresee the probably comic outcome of a situation. And similarly they learn to notice features of people's behaviour (Kanga's overprotectiveness, Rabbit's officiousness, Pooh's intuitive sympathy, inventiveness, and inconsequential, lateral-thinking wisdom), and to begin to draw conclusions therefrom. As a result, though the humour of "TRESPASSERS W" may continue to escape them, the unstated, implicit, adult basis of much of the rest of Milne's humour will help children to become more perceptive, discriminating, and sophisticated in their assessments of situations and people.

Appalled? Horrified that these well-loved children's classics should be seen as initiating young innocence into an appreciation of such cynicism as Eeyore displays, or an awareness of the sham wisdom of the Owls of this world and the presumption of its Rabbits in organization the "unbouncing" of nonconformists like Tigger? Or is such humour to be seen, rather, as a corrective to a fictional world which would otherwise be too protected — too much a sham Eden? Consider, for instance, Pooh's famous pitch for tolerance:

"Tigger is all right *really*," said Piglet lazily.
"Of course he is," said Christopher Robin.
"Everybody is *really*," said Pooh. "That's what I think," said Pooh. "But I don't suppose I'm right."
"Of course you are," said Christopher Robin. (*HPC*, 108)

Surely it would lack any real force if spoken within the covers of a book where everyone was as patently "all right" as Pooh and Piglet. We need Eeyore and Rabbit and Owl — yes, and Tigger, though as a rule it is the "adult" animals who cause the trouble — to provide a modicum of original orneriness for Pooh and Piglet to put up with and practise their virtue on. Thus adult-style humour is used to expose adult shortcomings, and fore-

shadow an inevitable fall from innocence.

The situation in *Charlotte's web* is almost exactly the reverse. For from the very first sentence and throughout the book to its closing pages, when the threat of death to Wilbur is finally lifted (and even then Charlotte's death reminds us that we all, including Wilbur, must die sometime), we are only too well aware that everything and everybody is not "all right." Against this unrelenting threat White pits the love, the wits, and the determination of a young girl and a spider, the cycle of the seasons with their power of renewal, and an overall comic mode or mood that reassures us that any but a happy ending is unthinkable.

Once again there are touches of humour directed at the adult reader. Templeton the rat is described as having "no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness."[5] Charlotte establishes her character as that of Wilbur's mentor as well as mother (and baffles Wilbur in the process) by using such words as "salutations," "sedentary," and "gullible" (*CW*, 35, 60, 67). And White uses language which adults may somewhat condescendingly find amusingly melodramatic to express Fern and Wilbur's emotions in, for instance, "This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of" (*CW*, 3) and "He didn't know whether he could endure the awful loneliness any more" (*CW*, 31). There is also some shrewd satire in the way Charlotte plays on human gullibility in her "commercials." She is well aware that to describe Wilbur as having "New Radiant Action" is a little excessive, but as she says, "I'm in this thing pretty deep now — I might as well go the limit" (*CW*, 101).

For the most part, however, the humour lies in action and character rather than the play of words, and is shared by adult and child in a thoroughly egalitarian manner. Much of the laughter is affectionately directed at Wilbur, who is more like a younger brother to the child than a peer. We watch the bemused animal escape, as instructed to by the goose, and then be told successively to "make for the woods," "Dodge about, dodge about," "Run down the hill," "Run uphill," "Turn and twist," and "Jump and dance" in order to preserve the precious freedom he does not know what to do with (*CW*, 20-1). And children are able to feel that such embarrassing episodes are reassuringly behind them, as are the one where Wilbur tries to spin a web (*CW*, 56-60) and the "Good night" scene (*CW*, 64-5), with Charlotte in each case playing the encouraging, half-indulgent, half-strict parent.

Humour is also intertwined throughout, in the person of Avery, with the threat of death. Right at the outset the heavily armed Avery first pours scorn on Fern's pig and then wants one himself (*CW*, 405). Later he poses a much more serious threat when he tries to capture Charlotte, but the danger is farcically averted when Templeton's rotten egg breaks (*CW*, 71-3). Much later, when Wilbur is about to be loaded into his crate to set off

for the fair, and faints on hearing Mr. Arable estimate how much ham and bacon he will make, Avery provides an innocent diversion by crawling round in the crate pretending to be a pig (*CW*, 126-7). And finally when Wilbur once more faints, this time at his moment of triumph, Avery replaces his sister (who is away on the Ferris wheel with Henry Fussy) as a member of the rescue team, along with Templeton, Zuckerman, and Lurvy, and once more provides light relief with his clowning (*CW*, 159-62).

Templeton, too, whose cynicism makes him almost an Eeyore figure, and whose greed tempts him into being an important if unenthusiastic ally of Charlotte's in saving Wilbur's bacon, is part of the overall comedy of the book. He and Avery illustrate, moreover, the submerged theme of White's story, below that of how "perfect love casteth out fear," that just as the threat to Wilbur comes from not one but many sources, so the rescue involves many of the characters who share the book with him. Thus humour, for the most part equally accessible to adult and child, is inextricably a part of the overall texture of a story that implicates all of us in both the cruelty and the kindness of the world.

Even in the book's most emotionally charged scene, when Wilbur learns of Charlotte's impending death and throws "himself down in an agony of pain and sorrow," the old indomitable Charlotte reasserts herself. " 'Come now, let's not make a scene,' said the spider. 'Be quiet, Wilbur. Stop thrashing about!'" (*CW*, 165). And we cannot help smiling. In my opening remarks on *Charlotte's web* I implied that Charlotte's death was a part of the book's assertion that, *pace* Pooh, everything is not "all right" in the world. Yet humour, here, is able to help us see that even death, when not cruelly and prematurely inflicted, is "all right."

The plot of *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* is much closer to those of fairy stories than is the case in any of the other books considered. The youngest of five children feels he will never succeed in doing all that his older siblings can do. On the first errand he is entrusted with, he is playfully threatened with the police, runs away, falls asleep in the park, and dreams he is sent to a prison for children. Here he is threatened by and with many exaggerated perils and punishments, leads a successful revolt, proves he can accomplish many things he has not dreamed (till now) he will ever be capable of, and wakes when his welcoming family finds him.

The role of such humour as is readily accessible to children seems closer to that of humour in *Charlotte's web* than in the Winnie-the-Pooh books, since it is clearly intended to counteract such frightening episodes or details as may temporarily escape the child's awareness that this is all a dream. Thus the judge sentences Jacob Two-Two (who feels so small that he must say everything twice over before anyone will take notice) to "two years, two months, two weeks, two days, two hours and two minutes in the

darkest dungeons of the children's prison."[6] Thus to reach the prison he must travel "by car, train, bus, canoe, helicopter, ox-cart, rickshaw, stilts, dinghy, skis, submarine, flying balloon, camel, raft, dog sled, roller-skates, glider and motorcycle" (*JTT*, 63).

Such humour as is aimed exclusively at adults seems to consist in the main of allusions to a wide range of literary sources. Jacob's attempt to shore up the confidence of the ludicrously incompetent counsel for the defence he has been allocated ("I have faith in you, Mr. Loser!" [*JTT*, 17]) seems a parody of the cheap psychology of any number of television shows. The judge's warning that "in this court, as in life, little people are considered guilty, unless they can prove themselves innocent, which is just short of impossible," his indignant response of "If you're innocent, why are you here?" to Jacob's plea of innocence, and the need to shake the jury awake for their verdict (*JTT*, 20-2) all recall the trial scene in *Alice in Wonderland* and the Queen of Hearts' gloriously adult assertion, "Sentence first, verdict afterwards." And the same gentleman's complaint, "If I don't get through your case quickly, I'll be late for my afternoon nap" (*JTT*, 21) might even remind one of Pope's "The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,/ And wretches hang that jurymen may dine."[7] The sentence "Fog, fog everywhere" (*JTT*, 30) echoes the opening chapter of *Bleak House* in imagery and syntax; the sign "THIS WAY TO SLIMERS' ISLE FROM WHICH NO BRATS RETURN" (*JTT*, 31) is redolent of Dante; and when Jacob, on being offered stale bread and water, asks "Can I have two slices, please?" (*JTT*, 35), he proclaims his kinship to Oliver Twist. Finally and most importantly, the Hooded Fang's sad story of the little child who put an end to his wrestling career by laughing in the middle of his terrifying preliminaries and announcing loudly, "He's not terrible, Daddy, he's funny!" (*JTT*, 35-8) is clearly an updated version of "The Emperor's new clothes." The echoes of Lewis Carroll and Hans Andersen make their points — indeed all the allusions do — but one is left with a feeling that this wealth of learned reference is a series of clever asides, without much cumulative impact on the story.

Or such is the case on a first reading. But a closer look suggests that the word parody is perhaps the key not just to the erudite allusions but to the book as a whole. So instead of the links to fairy tale already noted, one should perhaps emphasize the parallels most children will be much more keenly aware of — those with television. The central villain, after all, is an ex-all-in-wrestler, while the wicked chortles, grotesque punishments, and impossible flights of comic fantasy come straight from Saturday morning cartoons. And the range of approaches to such material is illustrated by the parody through exaggeration of the fauna and flora of the island on which the prison is set — bloodthirsty sharks, slimy crocodiles, poisonous snakes, buzzards, wolverines, millions of deathwatch beetles, and nettles

(*JTT*, 31), and the parody through belittlement of the glorious battle and victory in the department-store toy department (*JTT*, 74-6). A parody of television, moreover, is a parody of a parody. For today's children are quite sophisticated enough, in most cases, to recognize the world of cartoons as a take-off in terms of fantasy of so-called real life. Thus the dream world (or alternatively the once-upon-a-time world) into which Jacob steps when he falls asleep is the world of television rather than that of Alice or Jack and the beanstalk. And to the extent that parody is a relatively sophisticated, adult concept, and that the awareness of ambivalence that all parody gives rise to is an integral component of the humour in *Jacob Two-Two*, Richler's use of humour is closer to Milne's and White's. This is a story of triumph over adversity (and reassurance that others can do likewise) which the reader/listener does and does not believe; this is a use of television images and characters which exploits their melodramatic power at the same time as it tends to discredit such validity as they possess. This is a thoroughly modern fairy story.

One major element remains to be discussed. "Why can't they stand the sun?" asks Jacob, referring to the guards.

"Because," said Oscar, "speaking scientifically, any big person who cannot stand little ones also fears the sun."
"Or pets," added Pete.
"Or flowers," said Oscar.
Or even laughter, thought Jacob Two-Two, remembering The Hooded Fang. (*JTT*, 58)

And so Jacob forms his plan for reducing the prison's defences to helplessness by switching off the power to the fog-making machines at the exact time the fearless O'Toole and the intrepid Shapiro mount their attack from outside.

Has Richler here laid his positive forces open to the same undermining power of parody as calls in question the world of television? Is his message, that beneath the Hooded Fang's hairy chest there beats the heart of a child, a dishonest oversimplification — a cop-out? In fact I think he is saying much the same as *The house at Pooh Corner* and *Charlotte's web* combined: that everybody is all right *really*, but that that "really" covers a multitude of seeming exceptions and hard realities. The manner in which he says it, however, is of a piece with the rest of the book. He uses the clichés — the sun, pets, flowers — of television (albeit this time borrowed, in part, from a more archetypal source), but with just enough wit and humour to remove the gloss and roughen the edges.

Richler, as suggested earlier, uses humour in a way that combines the strategies of Milne and White. Humour intended for adult eyes only, with all its exploitation of parody, foregrounds a more widespread use of parody of a kind which sensitizes the child to the ambiguities of life. And at the

same time humour more obviously aimed at the child, such as the warning not to choose the electric eel soup on the menu because it's shocking (*JTT*, 46), has the more familiar role of reassuring the reader/listener that, despite the more scary elements of said ambiguities, everything is still all right, really.

In a word, therefore, the interplay and balance of forces between humour for adults and humour for children is important in the work of all three of these authors. In the Winnie-the-Pooh stories Milne pays children the compliment of making most of his humour relatively adult in nature, in that he requires them to work out what is happening in order to see why what is happening is funny. At the same time he uses mild satire of the adult characters to counteract what is perhaps too sweetly nostalgic a vision of childhood. White's humour is for the most part childoriented — or perhaps one should say universal. This for the very good reason that it has a key role to play in a universal (though usually thought to be "adult"), book-length, life-and-death struggle between love and greed. Humour must therefore be universally accessible. And Richler has the best of both worlds by using the adult technique of humour through parody to call things into question, and the sheer exuberance of a child's sense of humour to redress the balance.

NOTES

1 "I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children's story." C.S. Lewis, "On three ways of writing for children," in *Only connect*, ed. Sheila Egoff, G.t. Stubbs, and L.F. Ashley (Toronto: Oxford U.P., 1969), p. 210.

2 Rudyard Kipling, *Just so stories* (London: Macmillan, Library Edn., 1964), pp. 61 & 63. It is, of course, unlikely that most adults will be very clear as to what a precession of the equinoxes is, so their amusement will be little better informed than a child's in this instance.

3 A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (New York: Dell, 1984), p. 34. Page refs. for future quotations in text, title abbreviated to *WP*.

4 A.A. Milne, *The house at Pooh Corner* (New York: Dell, 1979), pp. 69-70. Page refs. for future quotations in text, title abbreviated to *HPC*.

5 E.B. White, *Charlotte's web* (New York: Harper & Row, 1st Trophy Edn., 1973), p. 46. Page refs. for future quotations in text, title abbreviated to *CW*.

6 Mordecai Richler, *Jacob Two-Two meets the Hooded Fang* (Toronto: Seal Books, 1982), p. 23. Page refs. for future quotations in text, title abbreviated to *JTT*.

7 Alexander Pope, *The rape of the lock* III, 21-22, in *The poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 227.

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