Textual capers: Carnival in the novels of Brian Doyle

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Résumé *M.J. Harker utilise ici les concepts connus de Bakhtine sur l'ironie rabelaisienne et le carnaval pour relire l'oeuvre de Brian Doyle. Ces concepts permettent de comprendre le questionnement intense de l'autorité chez Doyle et la dislocation presque bouffonne d'un langage participant toujours malgré lui à cette autorité. Harker conclut cet article sur une analyse détaillée de trois récits de Doyle*: Peggy's Cove, Up to Low *et* Angel Square.

'All kids! Listen to this. I'm glad you have to sit it out in the sweaty old sun. I'm glad you have to sit on your bums on the hot places and watch us adults cooling off if we feel like it. You kids have too many privileges. Anybody under fourteen is just a nobody! Why don't you grow up if you want to swim in the cool pool! Kids turn me off!...'

Then he jumped off the board and stuck his thumbs in his ears and wiggled his fingers and stuck his tongue out about a foot at all of us....

That was all everybody needed.

Dozens of kids hit the water the same time he did. Then dozens more piled in after them.

The lifeguard tried to stop them but they just ran right over him.

Dad had caused a revolt.

Just Dad and millions of kids all pushing him under and laughing and chasing him and jumping on his back. (*Hey Dad* 80-81)

The clownish, subversive Dad of Brian Doyle's first novel, *Hey Dad*, demonstrates the "narrative situation" (Chambers 3-49) for all of Doyle's novels. Dad, the notorious teller of exaggerated stories, assumes the voice of a child parodying an adult in order to overturn the adult authority of the swimming pool. Doyle adopts a similar narrative stance in his novels to produce a hilarious celebration of revolt. And it is in this manner that he can be seen to create his own version of the phenomenon described by Mikhail Bakhtin as carnival.

While Bakhtin certainly did not invent the idea of carnival, his articulation of the concept in *Rabelais and his world* has become the classic reference for this aspect of folk culture. In illustrating his theories primarily within the *oeuvre* of Rabelais, Bakhtin only makes glancing reference to the experience of childhood as a vehicle for carnival. But it is precisely this version of carnival as the Heraclitan "'dominion belong[ing] to the child'" (*Rabelais* 82) that becomes central in Doyle's creation and that connects his work with popular roots. The decrowning and inversion of the official medieval ecclesiastical and

feudal culture requisite in the celebration of carnival is commuted in Doyle to a destabilization of adult authority. This destabilization is achieved partially in the dramatic situation of the novels where the normal relationship between parent and child is reversed (for example, when Ryan, in *You can pick me up at Peggy's Cove*, worries about his father who ran away from home) or where the eternal hierarchy of child culprit under the surveillance of adult detective cum executioner is inverted (as in *Angel Square*).

More importantly, this destabilization, or what Bakhtin calls "degradation and debasement" (*Rabelais* 21), is achieved in Doyle's rendering of the folk humour of childhood, which is every bit as scatological as that of the medieval carnival. The novels record a raucous tumult of eating, drinking, burping, belching, farting, urinating, defecating, and fornicating that brings the focus of humour to the lowest material level. Appropriately, the champions of this laughter are people like Dad's drinking friend, Frank, an anathema to most sober adults in *Up to Low* – and especially to the clean and tidy Aunt Dottie – or marginal people like Wingding, facially deformed and mute, in *You can pick me up at Peggy's Cove*:

> Suddenly Wingding just about rips his pants with a huge long fart that sounds like a tent ripping.
>
> And it blows the gull right off the edge of the boat and the gull starts yelling 'Don't! Don't!' and Wingding falls to the floor of the boat and starts laughing and while he's laughing he's rolling around in the fish slime and squid pieces and blood and lines and goo is squirting out under him while he goes 'smack.' (*Peggy's Cove* 56)

Wingding's gooey revelry here is a form of the "grotesque realism" Bakhtin admired in Rabelais. Characterized by its specific focus on "the bodily lower stratum," "grotesque realism" has informed folk humour, or, as Bakhtin puts it, "the people's laughter," from time immemorial (*Rabelais* 20).

In Doyle's version of carnival, grotesque realism connects the children, some of whom are further marginalized as orphans or degraded as "mentally deficient" (*Angel Square*) with the clowns and fools, mutes and eccentrics, and the poor folk of Lower Town Ottawa, Low, Peggy's Cove, and the Uplands Emergence Shelter. It is laughter engendered by this "grotesque realism" that Bakhtin describes as organizing "the people's second life" (*Rabelais* 8), lying outside the fear and prohibitions of authority and officialdom: "Laughter...overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority" (*Rabelais* 90).

At the same time, carnival laughter is not unidirectional. "It is," according to Bakhtin, "also directed at those who laugh." Integrative, "ambivalent," this festive laughter "expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (*Rabelais* 12). Bakhtin insists that carnival is "not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates." And while he allows that "it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern

of play," he declares that "carnival does not know footlights,... it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (*Rabelais* 7). Doyle is also concerned with this inclusive, spirit of his carnival; but, conversely, he achieves this universality by installing footlights and muddling the distinction between action and spectacle. Wingding, who sleeps on the stage of Aunt Fay's old one-room school house, ordinarily makes a performance of going to bed, although no one perceives this as such until Ryan and Aunt Fay spy on him one evening. Encouraged by the clapping and shouting of his audience, Wingding repeats his performance over and over to the point of exhaustion and to the point where the distinction between the performing spectators, "clapping and yelling," and the actor who takes his cues from them becomes facetious (*Peggy's Cove* 64-66). We are all simultaneously actors and spectators, even in the insignificant quotidian activities of living.

Yet if the carnival would connect and unify its celebrants, the unity it achieves is an unstable one, which Bakhtin refers to as "the 'ever uncompleted whole' of being" (*Rabelais* 379). While the incompletion, and restlessness of carnival permit its acts of sportive degradation, these acts are at the same time creative. As Bakhtin explains: "Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth, it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (*Rabelais* 21). Bakhtin sees this "material bodily principle [to be] contained not in the biological individual...but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed" (*Rabelais* 19). The people themselves, then, are like "the grotesque body" that is always "in the act of becoming": "It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds another body" (*Rabelais* 317). According to Bakhtin, "the grotesque body" is a special image of carnival that "ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths" (*Rabelais* 317-316). As such, the grotesque body has enormous appeal in the carnival experience that is "opposed to all that [is] ready-made and completed, to all pretense of immutability" and whose symbols "are filled with [the] pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (*Rabelais* 11).

While not in the rough explicitness of Rabelais, Doyle's carnival also includes imagery of "the grotesque body." For example, as Hubbo moves up in the world of *Easy Avenue*, he enacts a version of the Cinderella myth. And his favorite trick – a perfect handstand – that he imprudently performs to defy the weight of the established order just where it is heaviest (at the top of the huge ceremonial entrance to Glebe Collegiate Institute and in a posh living room on Easy Avenue) prefigures his success, in the artistic logic of carnival imagery. Fleurette shares some of Huggo's windfall, exchanging her rags for finer threads, but only after her apprenticeship in standing upside down:

Her dress fell down over her and her hair hung down to the ground. All I could see of her was her legs. Her legs were straight and her toes were pointed. The top of her toes pressed against a tree. A perfect first try. She looked like a strange creature, feet-like hands, no head, and long straight white antennae with toes. (*Easy Avenue* 28)

This particular version of "the grotesque body," with its head/anus reversal and concomitant foregrounding of these orifices that forever open into the world, asserts the characteristic playful incompleteness, instability, and vitality of carnival. And in carnival's "peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (*a l'envers*), of the 'turnabout,' of the continual shifting from top to bottom from front to rear (*Rabelais* 17), it forecasts a kind of renewal in the world of Easy Avenue. Fleurette will soon reject her "new clothes" (99), and Hubbo will reappraise the ideas of wealth embodied in the house on Easy Avenue and success represented in the ascendant powers of the HiY in Glebe Collegiate.

But carnival cannot change existence materially. It is, as Bakhtin realized, like any other freedom: "it can change only the *sense* of existence" ("Notes" *Speech genres* 137). Significantly, in these last summative notes of Bakhtin, the power and freedom to change "the sense of existence" is specifically attached to language. While the role of Rabelais' carnival laughter and grotesque realism in the critical and renovative assault on language can only be gauged from a retrospective distance in Bakhtin's writing, there is no question that playing with words, with language itself, is the obvious sport of Doyle's carnival. Throughout the novels, there is a consistent set of metonymic signs for authority, power, tradition, wealth, institution: wide and winding stairs, marble, brass, hanging art, expansiveness. This is repeated in the Supreme Court, the Art Gallery, the Museum in *Angel Square*; the Drummer's home in *You can pick me up at Peggy's Cove*; the Collegiate and the home on Easy Avenue in *Easy Avenue*. The same formula is used for a movie theatre in *Angel Square*:

We were upstairs above the main lobby. The red plush curtains were all around us.... It was like a palace for a Pharaoh.

There was marble and brass and copper shining all around us.

And big, curving stairs with marble railings curving up...and the sound of feet on quiet rugs.

...and the paintings on the wall as you went down the wide winding stairs. (85-86)

In a novel crammed with intertexts of dozens of movies, radio programs, singers, comic books, this movie theatre easily becomes the shrine, the institution of the institution of text.

From the perspective of the child who undertakes his apprenticeship in life largely through language, it is the language of the grown-up establishment that would constrain reality, enforce convention, and institute the ideologies that would in turn totalize and protect those conventions. Doyle's carnivalesque antidote is to strip language of its constitutive authority, its "pre-

tense at immutability" (*Rabelais* 11), to turn it inside out, bounce it into different contexts, toss it in the air, demystify it. In one sense, Doyle would lead the child in textual Bacchanalia just as Bakhtin would induct an illiterate peasant into an understanding of "heteroglossia." Bakhtin's peasant initially does not understand that all language is made up of diverse, socially-determined languages, each of these being "specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (*Dialogic imagination* 291-292). Only when those languages begin to be "dialogized" in the peasant's consciousness, when the peasant regards "one language (and the verbal world corresponding to it) through the eyes of another language" – for example, the language of everyday life through the language of prayer or song – does he become aware of the different languages and their conflicting or "interanimating" value systems. "The inviolability and predetermined quality of these languages," adds Bakhtin, now comes "to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's situation among them beg[ins]" (*Dialogic imagination* 296).

Bakhtin admired Rabelais' use of the game of words, *coq a l'ane*, "from rooster to ass," precisely because it disclosed the "inherent ambivalence" of words, "their multiple meanings and the potentialities that would not manifest themselves in normal conditions" (*Rabelais* 222-223). And it is something very similar to this "genre of intentionally absurd verbal combinations [and]...completely liberated speech that ignores all norms, even those of elementary logic" (*Rabelais* 422) that Doyle deploys in his carnival. Here, for example, is Dad in *Angel Square* explaining why there will be no Christmas turkey:

> Then Dad changed the subject and told us he couldn't get a turkey for Christmas because there was still a shortage of turkeys because of the war and Aunt Dottie said he should get two chickens instead....
> 'Why are there chickens but no turkeys?' I said.
> 'Because of the war.' Aunt Dottie said.
> 'But why?' I said.
> 'Because they used them all in the war,' Dad said.
> 'Don't listen to him,' Aunt Dottie said.
> 'What did they use them for?' I said.
> 'They dropped them out of airplanes onto the Germans,' Dad said.
> 'Lies,' Aunt Dottie said.
> 'They also used them as camouflage.'
> 'Why do you fill the boy's mind with lies?' Aunt Dottie said.
> 'They were also sent in as spies – espionage.'
> 'Don't listen to him,' Aunt Dottie said, and she covered up my ears. (45)

By mischievous alienation effects (he could go on for ever, but Aunt Dottie stops him), Dad rumples the ideological and sociological importance of the regulation festive bird by shaking out its hidden relativism *as a word*.

Doyle also shares Rabelais' delight in taunting "the deceptive human word by a parodic destruction of syntactic structures" to the point where it becomes "a parody of the very act of conceptualizing anything in language" (*Dialogic imagination* 309). Tommy, in *Angel Square*, is in Blue Cheeks's English class where he is forced to explain the problem with the sentence, "Ralph edged closer as the moose sniffed suspiciously and snapped the picture":

'Five seconds,' said Blue Cheeks, 'or you stay and write lines!' He sounded like he was choking. I was desperate.

'A moose could never hold a camera properly or snap a picture because of its large and clumsy hooves,' I said, trying to make the best sentence I could.

I knew I was doomed, so I sat down.

Blue Cheeks gurgled, 'One hundred lines – "I must learn my grammar!"' (20-22)

The process of riotously shuffling words through various grammatical and semiotic contexts ultimately produces a wariness and detachment in the face of all language. As Tommy describes his job as an altar boy, it is as if the words have been pried from the surfaces of objects that are conventionally laden with powerful meanings and beliefs. When Tommy begins, Father Foley "looked like any kind man you might see in a store or on a street shoveling snow." After the ritual of getting him "ready for his show" – of putting on his amice, alb, cincture, maniple, stole, chasuble – he looked "pretty special." But as Tommy completes his own ritual at the altar, he is unable "to whisper the mystery":

I bowed a few times and went over to the credence table and fixed up the cruets of wine and water and the little wafers of bread....

Later I went and got the wine cruet and the water cruet from the credence table. With my right hand I gave Father Foley the wine cruet after I kissed it. Then I gave him the water cruet with my right hand after I kissed it and got the wine cruet back in my left hand and kissed it again.

Then I got the plate and the towel and I helped Father Foley wash his hands.

Later, when Father Foley lifted up the chalice, with my right hand I rang the bell and with my thumb and finger of my left hand I held up his beautiful chasuble.

And I tried to whisper the mystery with Father Foley but I couldn't. (95)

There is no "mystery"; there is no more mystery here than in the long, detailed accounts given earlier in the book of Tommy's other jobs such as "shaking the ashes" in the old octopus furnace, or cleaning the Jewish synagogue.

In all the textual capers of Doyle's carnival, language becomes so relativized and ambiguous that it testifies in a new sense to carnival's "victory of laughter over fear...over the mystic terror of God,...over the oppression and guilt related to all that was consecrated and forbidden" (*Rabelais* 90). Doyle's carnival does not celebrate the mock masses of the medieval fete, but it does engender an emancipation from what Bakhtin described as the "one-piece, serious, unconditional and indisputable" imperative of all authority, linguistic or otherwise,

while at the same time it empowers "human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities" (*Rabelais* 49). And one of the most important effects of this empowerment is that "people [a]re...reborn for new, purely human relations" (*Rabelais* 10). Similarly, for Doyle as a children's author, the point of his textual carnival is not just a hilarious destabilizing of the adult world order and its constitution in language, but a regeneration of that order as the child, in the course of all the textual antics, secures a place for himself within it. While all of Doyle's fiction can be read as a single text demonstrating his version of carnival, in order to see the workings of carnival's redemptive energies, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at three successive novels where the textual Bacchanalia seems loudest – *You can pick me up at Peggy's Cove, Up to Low*, and *Angel Square*.

Peggy's Cove, both metaphorically and literally, is the story of young Ryan's attempts to put himself "in the picture." Confused and sadly missing his runaway father, he is inclined to see the world in terms of pictures – but pictures that only underline his own absence from them. As he watches an idyllic scene of a family picnic, for example, he feels particularly "lonesome" and fatherless (19-20). But this inclination to view the world and himself in terms of perfect pictures is understandable: it is one of the prevailing orders of truth and representation. Aunt Fay's description of the mania of picture-taking tourists around Peggy's Cove is testimony:

> And she told me that it was the perfect fishing village because of the boats and the wharfs and the rocks and the lighthouse and the fishermen and how because it was perfect everybody wanted to take a picture of it.
>
> Then she told me that every perfect place has a perfect spot in it to take the perfect picture.
>
> 'My shop is right in front of the perfect place where everybody likes to stand with their cameras to take the perfect picture of the perfect fishing village,' she told me. (18)

At this point, however, the textual carnival picks up the received expression, "perfect," and casts it adrift in its interminable doubling in the story, folding back, over and over, self-parodically, on itself. Just a few pages further on, for example, it becomes hilariously ironic in the traffic jam (20) or in the great race "to take the famous picture of the cove and the sun sinking into the sea" (29) until the carnival triumphantly disposes of it in Wingding's characteristic gestures while cleaning fish:

> One tourist turned around to get a quick picture of Wingding throwing guts and heads. He wasn't quick enough. Just as he snapped his picture, his camera, his hands and his face got splattered with the insides and head of a big, fat cod. (109)

"Carnival," as "the true feast of time,...of becoming, change, and renewal," is, according to Bakhtin, "hostile to all that is immortalized and completed"

(*Rabelais* 10). And just as Doyle's carnival would mock the authoritative stasis and precision of the "perfect picture," it underlines the relativity of all language. Everything depends on context: who says it, to whom, where, when. It is like Eddie's favorite – in fact, *only* – adjective, "nice," which he uses to describe everything from the weather to a shark-bite, and which is used by everyone else (except the mute Wingding) at one point or another. Context is all because the sign – whether it is "the signal at the beginning of the long dash," a groundhog, or asking a fisherman to take you out by not asking him to take you out – is entirely relative to its situation. As carnival repeatedly demonstrates, language is necessarily unstable and destabilizing because it is common property: it belongs to whatever context it happens to be in, not to its encoder. Using language, then, is like mailing a letter: "Once you let a letter go in the slot, even before it hits bottom, you know you can *never* get it back" (88).

When Ryan is finally reunited with his father at the end of the novel, he imagines the two of them in another picture:

> A camera in my head started working. I could see us there, surrounded by millions of tourists and gulls.
>
> I imagined the camera moving back, back and up, until you could see the whole of Peggy's Cove with the foam smashing away at the lighthouse and the pretty colours and the boats out at sea and the tiny tourists running around and the little white dots that were gulls.
>
> And the tiny still figures in the middle of it all. That was Dad and me. (119-120)

This looks like "the perfect picture" of these two particular tourists taken on "the perfect spot." But this imaginary photograph, copying the pose of an earlier one taken "out west," is already touched by the time that is so incessantly marked throughout the novel in the ubiquitous ticking clocks, radio signals, and even the Drummer's nervous tapping. In that it records the shift, the gap, of time and context between the earlier "picture...at home on [the] wall" (119), between the happy holiday long before Ryan's father left home, and the present reunion, this picture can only be an imperfect one. As a photographic image, it can only testify to the inevitable relativity and incessant transformations that lie at the heart of carnival for all signs – whether they be linguistic or photographic.

Perhaps the ultimate carnivalization of language in this novel is the demonstration that language and all the stories and images conjured with it only serve to compensate for a lack, for the absence of something that is desired. This is not only obvious in Ryan's image of the happy family picnic mentioned earlier, or in the various idyllic reminiscences of his absent father interspersed throughout the story, it is also apparent in the motivations behind many other stories that interweave the text: Eddie's story about his father who ran away to a circus after he caught a cod that could sing "O Canada" (57), Ryan's sto-

ries in his letter to make his father feel guilty and come back, even the Widow Weed's monologues to the shark skull, and Wingding's to the wall. As Aunt Fay explains: "Everybody in this world talks to people they love when they're not there.... They make up people who love them and talk to them" (94). In the poignancy of Aunt Fay's explanation lies the shift in perspective, the mental adjustment, that is the legacy of the carnival's merriment. The images and stories of language are not only weapons to isolate and diminish us, nor are they simply toys to delight us, but they are also tools that we all can use in our own particular fashion to help us in the process of living, which is unfortunately always less than perfect.

In *Up to Low*, Doyle's next novel, the carnival sport continues – but this time the target is the received stories and legends with which a society documents itself. The epicentre of the textual highjinks seems to be the appropriately named Low that chronicles itself exclusively in exaggerated legends, tall tales, and apocryphal beer hall gossip. Even recipes are stories "up" at Low, and it is possible to spend "quite a romantic evening" (73) reading them with a girl friend. When young Tommy arrives at Low, he is particularly bewildered by the scores of stories about the notorious Mean Hughie and understandably suffers perspective fatigue, alternately dreaming of Hughie as "very small...away down in a well" and then as gargantuan, his "huge face...forehead, eyes and nose...staring [from]...over the mountain, about a mile away!" (85). Knowing this world and its past through its texts is even more daunting when the oldest living repository of the outrageous hand-me-down stories is Crazy Micky. Tommy asks his father:

'Can you believe someone who's called crazy?'
'Have to.'
'Why?'
'Because he's all we've got....' (67)

Moreover, everything that is presently happening around Low is also transformed by carnival's playfulness into ludic repetition or ostentatious artifice. Sometimes, for example, the text becomes a sort of prose ballad with the refrain enjoined by different characters:

'Mean Hughie's got the cancer and he's threatening to die....'
'I'll believe it when I see it....' (26 and throughout)
'I hear Frank's going to Father Sullivan to take the pledge....'
'I'll believe it when I see it!' (37 and throughout)

At other times, repetition is combined with obvious artifice. Here is part of the second version of the arrival at Low:

It was like a photograph, only coloured. Or a painting. For a second everything and everybody was still. All the people were there, in their places, all with their faces turned look-

ing at us in our car. Like a big crowded beautiful colored painting in a museum. (39)

Tommy's particular interest in Mean Hughie's daughter, Baby Bridget, whose eyes are "the greenest green...the shape of the petals of the trillium" (16), increases his bewilderment at the riot of exaggerated and made-up stories careening around Low. He is exasperated in his efforts "to fit Baby Bridget into it all" (30) until he is drawn into the still centre of the carnival at Old Willy the Hummer's where the humming (Willy's and the generator's) swallows up speech, literally dissolves the stories. It is from this paradoxically quiet perspective deep inside carnival that Tommy is able to bring about the reconciliation of Mean Hughie with his daughter and return his wasted body to Low. And while these river scenes with Bridget, the Hummer, and the dying Hughie are presented in a more naturalized narrative style than the earlier sequences of flagrant carnival, Tommy, "the hero," and Bridget, "his friend with her poor arm" (15), are about to be encoded into the outrageous Gatineau mythology by its various perpetrators who welcome them back to Low. But the distorting and destabilizing effects of carnival have nevertheless enabled Tommy to get inside, behind the legends, to make his own.

The younger Tommy in Doyle's next novel, *Angel Square*, is much more carnival's prankish accomplice than his older incarnation in *Up to Low*. And in his slick manipulation of language and story, he is more sophisticated. The world that surrounds him in *Angel Square* is entirely made up of stories and the intertexts of other stories; there is, in fact, no "hors-text." It is like the picture on the box of Quick Quaker Oats, there is always text and more text – the repetition, citation, imitation, invocation of movies, radio programs, newspapers, posters, inscriptions, paintings, drawings of hamburger buns, comics, cartoons, speeches, signs, songs, sacks stamped "Richies's Feed and Seed," photographs, books – all the way down:

The other thing about the Quaker is that he's holding a box of Quick Quaker Oats! And of course, on the box he's holding there's a picture of himself holding a box of Quick Quaker Oats. And on that little box there's the same picture. And if I had X-ray vision like Superman I would be able to see the next little Quaker and the next one and the next one. (13)

Everything in this textworld – whether it is a found "scarf lying in a big marble room" (87), or the present of a cap gun, a rubber cigar, a detective badge, or a "Richard Hudnut's Three Flower Gift Set" (71) – is a prop, a costume, a make-up kit to re-enact the plays that are already written. Even the snow that continues to fall throughout the story is a part of Bing Crosby's famous "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" that plays over the loudspeakers at Union Station. When Tommy decides to find out who is responsible for the anti-Semitic attacks on Sammy's father, he snatches the role of "The Shadow," the hero of his favorite radio program. Chivalrously devoted to "the lovely Margot Lane"

(11), whose namesake is the radio Shadow's accomplice, Tommy (as the Shadow would) roots out and exposes from behind his shadowy mask "what evil LURKS in the hearts of men...! Heh, heh, heh, heh...!" (14). Stereotypically, he braves the evil Mr. Logg and his dirty and foul-smelling apartment (where he would refuse to mention the name of the lovely Margot), discovers the incriminating evidence of Logg's violent religious prejudice, and wins the admiration of the "only girl in the world" (124) who lives on White-path Street.

From one perspective, Tommy is carnival's champion in its revenge on hypocrisy, fear, and prejudice. And the war he prosecutes is a veritable battle of texts with his own script as "The Shadow," Mr. Logg's anti-Semitic and violent comic books, the written accusatory letters, and the incriminating printing on a seed sack, all tumbling about in the fracas. From another perspective, however, Tommy himself becomes carnival's sport. As someone who isn't "anything," he appreciates the absurdity and irony in the labels of "Dogan" (48), "Pea Soup"(83), and "Jew" (90), but apparently misses the larger ironic parallels, such as those between the "war" just ended and "the war...raging" daily in Angel Square (23), where he often discusses his detective plans with Gerald or Coco while having a "great time" (22) fighting.

Carnival insists on ambivalence and instability, and this extends to its heroes as well as to language itself. At one point, Tommy wonders whether it was when he decided to be a writer in grade five that everything started going wrong (17). At another time, he considers whether his mentally-retarded sister, Pam, "was lucky in a way, not knowing anything" (72). But then he adds, "She also didn't know about Gerald or Sammy or Coco or the lovely Margot Lane or Lamont Cranston or The Shadow or Mr. Maynard" (72). Language and stories are not innocent, certainly, and they can be the cause of great mischief. But they can also be powerful restorative and purgative tools. Their ambivalence deserves disrespectful respect, carnivalization.

Undoubtedly, Doyle, the teacher *cum* children's novelist, would shake up some of his reader's conventional assumptions about language and stories. Within a culture that mass produces and mass consumes all sorts of narratives in all sorts of media (Heath 85), the problematization of narrative is laudable, if not critical, especially for young people. And as Doyle continues to demonstrate in his latest novel, *Covered bridge* – an immense *mise-en-abyme* of implausible fictions that stretch infinitely beyond the bizarre articles in O'Driscoll's Police Gazette, Hubbo's outrageous tale, or old Mickey Malarkey's lies – stories are very tricky commodities. But Doyle's carnivalistic irreverence, his prying up of language from the images, ideals, and ideologies to which it is conventionally made to adhere, his deliberate narrative artifice, also makes him a children's author who is emphatically postmodern. His novels, in the manner that Linda Hutcheon sees as representative of postmodern fiction, ask his young readers "to question the processes by which we represent ourselves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we

make sense and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture" (Hutcheon 38). Doyle has undoubtedly turned up the volume of the "reduced laughter" that Bakhtin identified as characteristic of post-Renaissance literature (*Problems* 131), and, in doing so, his rollicking novels of postmodern carnival are bursting open new possibilities for children's literature.

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