



Authorgraph No.123: Jon Scieszka

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Jon Scieszka interviewed by **Julia Eccleshare**.

Jon Scieszka interviewed by Julia Eccleshare

Stand up comedy's loss has been children's books' gain. <!--break--> In London as part of a whistle-stop promotional tour of the UK, Jon Scieszka's dizzy jokes entertained his audience every bit as much in performance as in print. In both, his sense of the absurd is terrific and his timing, the key to all good jokes, superb. He is just as dryly amusing in private. Self-deprecating and modest which is remarkable given his enormous success in the US. He has great respect for the craftsmanship of what he does and is thoughtful about its origins without ever being pompous. His books have been described by critics as 'deconstructionist', 'surreal' and 'iconoclastic', or by what Jon sees as a mere codeword, 'zany'. They are all of these but, above all, they have enormous warmth and are very, very funny.

It all comes, he says, from his family. 'I was one of six brothers so, as you can imagine, it was pretty raucous. I'm the second son which is an ideal position. Big enough to get the good food at the table but not the one who had to make the cutting wave. My sense of humour was developed at the dinner table. You had to carve out some airtime with a mode of attack. My older brother talked very fast ' he became a lawyer, which figures ' and I would tell the joke or make a bizarre comment and sort of derail things. You had to make good use of a short time to be heard. It was pretty lively.'

As the mother of only three sons, I have a shrewd idea of what pretty lively might have felt like to his parents but clearly the Scieszkas enjoyed their sons' boisterous company and developed it creatively: 'At the dinner table you always had an audience so you really had to hone your material. It wasn't so much the set piece jokes, they often didn't go down well, it was more the asides.'

At school, too, Jon learnt the value of the undercover aside. 'My report cards always said, 'Doesn't quite live up to abilities.' I was young for the class and took the role of undercover humorist in the back. You wouldn't pick me out as the wild class clown guy because at a Catholic school I very quickly realised that it was better to stay underground, but I always knew the value of a good joke.'

It is exploiting that knowledge that has propelled Jon's writing over the last decade since **The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!** was published in 1990. Finding that what he most liked writing was ideally suited to the picture book format and therefore to children's books came after his years as a school teacher. Teaching in a private, alternative school in New York where he introduced Kafka's **Metamorphosis** to his eight year old pupils, he found that he loved 'connecting' with children, something that gives him greatest pleasure in his writing. Though he resists the labelling of his books as being for 'reluctant readers' which, as he says, 'it's really bad. It's beyond unfortunate as it is exactly what will put them off', he is very aware of the kind of reader his books most appeal to because he saw many of them as a teacher. 'Those kids, and it's mostly boys, who find it hard to move on from picture books. They need to connect with the books. I try to engage with the audience, first on its own terms and then on many levels. Using humour is a great way of doing that.'

Jon had already found that the same was true of teaching. "Being a teacher is a bit like being a stand-up comic. You have to fight to stay alive and to keep the class alive. You only have a few minutes. I used humour to command attention in the classroom and to show that learning could be entertaining and fun." Jon's move into teaching came after he abandoned a college medical training and changed instead to a Masters degree in Fiction Writing where what he liked best was "goofing around with a short, narrative form". Like his humour, his attitude to teaching was much influenced by his own childhood. "My mother was a nurse and my father was an elementary school principal. My dad was just wonderful. He was never one to talk down to us. He was either explaining things or just listening to what we had to say no matter how cock-eyed it was. I came honestly by that connection to teaching and just respecting kids."

Coming from Jon, that is no glib, crowd-pleasing explanation justifying why he writes for children. He is tuned-in to how children see the world around them and he likes their view of it. He cites 7 to 8 year olds as his favourite group to teach because they are moving between being babies and adulthood. His observations of them and their interaction in class has provided the impetus to many of his stories. "The most important responsibility that kids' writers have is to realise what an intense audience they are. Kids really take the stories that touch them to heart. Almost all my stories come from fairy tales and fables and nursery rhymes. I use those forms to get the meat of the story right out of the lives of kids. The **Squids will be Squids** stories are lifted right out of the lives of my kids and their friends." It is the teasing interplay between the familiar original and an often bizarre reworking that so delights his audience. The stories are many layered and the approachable picture book formats with their striking Lane Smith illustrations belie their depth. Adults sometimes miss the point, he ruefully acknowledges, citing some of the US reviews of **Squids will be Squids** which did not catch the connection of the stories with real life.

Jon is undoubtedly seen as a writer who appeals directly to children, sometimes bypassing the usual adult mediators. He relishes that role and has a shrewd explanation for it. "When I've looked over my books I realise that my ultimate message is just to tell kids to think for themselves. I ask them to look at things and decide for themselves what they think is going on."

Asking children to think about the what the story is telling them and whether it is by a reliable narrator came from his fascination with form and where the story is coming from. Jon sees children's books as an ideal place for playing with form because, though many adults are worried about it, children love it. "Kids are just in the middle of learning about form and they are so fresh in their responses. In **The Stinky Cheese Man** the jokes are almost all about breaking forms. Like the title page being in the wrong place. They've just learnt that the title page should be at the beginning and they love pointing out that it is in the wrong place. I've had it pointed out to me loads of times." The empowering message combined with Jon and Lane Smith's witty breaking and remaking of traditional forms of both storytelling and illustrations have also caused them to be seen as being deliberately subversive. "I'm now lumped with all the subversive types like Roald Dahl who was another guy who championed kids and who told them to think for themselves and to challenge authority. And, Dr Seuss, who was so radical when I was a kid. He just blew on us, like someone subversive in the best sense."

Jon's combination of radical and funny stories firmly rooted in the oldest traditions of storytelling have taken the US by storm. A decade after its publication **The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!** has sold over 4 million copies and been translated across the world. **The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales** scooped the prestigious Caldecott Medal, much to the alarm of purists who were unhappy with a book that had pages printed upside down, a title page in the middle and narrators who skip in and out of familiar stories. **Maths Curse** rewrote both maths and story and laid to rest years of stodgy, off putting teaching. So much so that in France it won the Salon du Livre prize for the Best Translated Book in France.

Not that Jon thought success came quickly at the time although now, with his better knowledge and understanding of publishing, he can see how unusual and remarkable his sales figures have been. "At the time, we just thought the publishers should have printed more first time. We were very naive." It was, after all, the reward for the gamble his wife had persuaded him to take in having a year off teaching to try his hand as a writer. "I began to appreciate the ditch-digging element of writing. It's about showing up and trying." In his case, teamed up with Lane Smith, Jon Scieszka

showed up, kept on trying and in doing so has saved many children throughout the world from the struggle that reading might have been. He will certainly join Dr Seuss as one of the great innovators in children's reading.

Julia Eccleshare is the children's books editor of *The Guardian*

Photograph courtesy of Penguin Children's Books.

The Books

(published in hardback by Viking and in paperback by Puffin)

With Lane Smith:

The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs! , 0 14 054056 3, £4.99 pbk

Squids will be Squids , 0 670 88227 5, £12.99 hbk, 0 14 056523 X, £5.99 pbk

The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales , 0 14 054896 3, £5.99 pbk

Maths Curse , 0 14 056381 4, £5.99 pbk

With Steve Johnson:

The Frog Prince Continued , 0 14 054285 X, £4.99 pbk



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