



## Hal's Reading Diary - November 2005

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[155](#) [2]

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Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

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**Roger Mills** has more thoughts on the nature of humour.

**Psychodynamic counsellor Roger Mills continues his reflections on the interaction between developmental issues and the part that humour plays in four and a half year-old Hal's life.** <!--break-->

In the last diary ( **BfK** No. 154) I looked at the things that Hal finds funny and I talked about his passion for any kind of gag that has to do with pooh. Writing that diary I found myself wanting to explore the pooh joke phenomenon in greater depth. Space didn't permit then. But it does now.

Pooh jokes. Why does Hal, and as far as I can see all his little friends, find pooh so killingly amusing? One common line on humour is that we tend to laugh about the things that have the capacity to embarrass us or shame us. Adults make jokes about sex, and, with a very few exceptions, would be deeply embarrassed were anyone to walk in on them while they were having it. (It is also interesting to notice that shameful stuff doesn't just provide material for humour, but for insults too. Not only are jokes about sex legion, but sex words are the lingua franca of verbal abuse.)

But does the shame theory stack up when applied to Hal's pooh jokes? There is actually a big difference between Hal's behaviour and the adult shame scenario just described. Because at the moment he doesn't bat an eyelid if someone watches him have a pooh.

But maybe that is being a bit hasty. Although Hal has no qualms whatever about being observed poohing, he would get very upset if he were to pooh in his pants. Mercifully that hasn't been a problem of Hal's (I do hope this isn't tempting fate), but I vividly recall the shame and embarrassment of one of his little friends who had poohed herself and who didn't dare move from the seat she was sitting in because she was so upset.

Though children of Hal's age might be untroubled by doing a pooh in public, they do all know that pooh is something dirty and smelly and nasty. Psychoanalyst Melanie Klein argued that babies are born with an innate sense of pooh as waste product that is expelled (and as a result of this, Klein argued, evacuating nasty stuff becomes a basic psychological defence). You might argue with Klein's dating of this attitude to pooh to the very start of life, but it does seem clear that by the time a child is able to talk, pooh is seen as nasty and potentially shaming. And if it can be shaming, it is tailor-made for insults and for humour.

Given the fact that kids find it so funny, it might be thought surprising that pooh doesn't make more of an appearance in kid's literature. There are a few pooh books. We read a hilarious (or Hal thought it was) one recently in which a small mole is evacuated on at the start of the story by a mystery offender and spends the rest of the tale examining the stools of various animals to see who is the culprit. But such titles are in a tiny minority. General muckiness is much better represented, **Fungus the Bogeyman** being an obvious example. But isn't there something just a little coy about the fact that the one form of grossness that the Bogey world doesn't revel in is pooh? Is it possible that there is a best-selling theme waiting to be discovered here? Or is Hal's sense of humour getting to me?

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