



Flat Stanley: a Comic Hero

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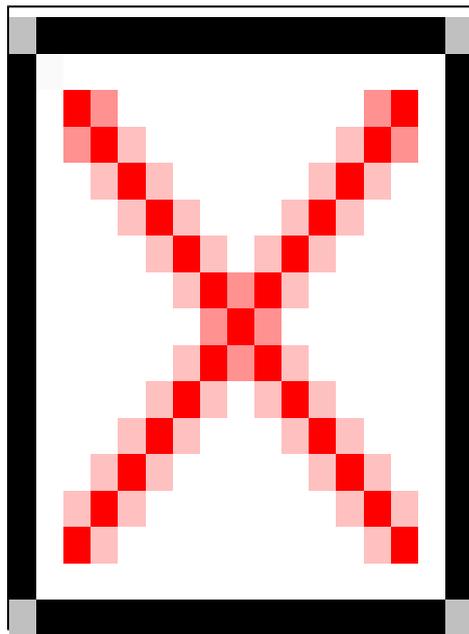
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Elizabeth Hammill celebrates his appeal.



Flat Stanley ? Jeff Brown?s timeless comedy about the adventures of a boy squashed pancake-thin by his bulletin board ? would surely have won the Roald Dahl Funny Prize had such an award existed when it was first published in 1964 in America and in 1968 here. What is the nature of its appeal? **Elizabeth Hammill** explores.

Jeff Brown?s startlingly original ?what if? premise ? the notion of a flat but otherwise ordinary boy ? sprang from a bedtime conversation with his two young sons. What would happen, one of them worried, if their heavy new bulletin board fell on him in the night? Brown, an editor and writer of short stories for **The New Yorker** and **The Saturday Evening Post**, reassured his son, but added ?as a joke?: ?When you wake up in the morning, you?ll probably be flat.? This idea tickled the family?s funny bone, and making up ?flat tales? became part of the boy?s bedtime rituals. A friend urged Brown to send one of the ensuing stories to a publisher and in spring 1964, **Flat Stanley**, with illustrations by Tomi Ungerer, was published.

In this playful, extravagantly improbable tale, Stanley Lambchop, squashed flat by his bulletin board, wakes up to find himself just half an inch thick. Is his family dismayed? Not at all. Indeed, the Lambchops? straight-faced, matter of fact response to this single bizarre alteration to reality provides a springboard for the dry wit and deadpan humour that make **Flat Stanley** such a delight. ?Darndest thing I?ve ever seen,? his father remarks. ?Let?s all have breakfast,? his mother says. ?Then Stanley and I will go to see Doctor Dan and hear what he has to say.? Doctor Dan finds his young patient well, but adds: ?Sometimes we doctors, despite all our years of training and experience, can only marvel at how little we really know.?

For the Lambchops and young readers of about 5-9 who are busy exploring ?what if? in their everyday play and are

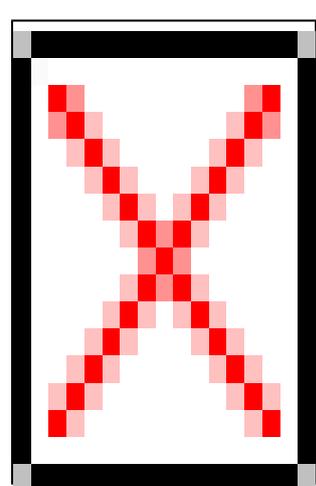
fascinated by physically exceptional children, Stanley's changed shape opens up a world of new possibilities. He slides under doors. His mother lowers him on a string through a grating to rescue her lost ring ('Is your yo-yo stuck?' a passing policeman asks). He is posted in an enormous envelope to visit his best friend in California ('...much less expensive than a train or aeroplane ticket,' thinks his father), and poses as a shepherdess in an empty picture frame at the Famous Museum to foil an art robbery. Stanley makes the most of his new shape, but his little brother Arthur is jealous. 'Nobody knows who I am these days,' he sighs. When the novelty and celebrity wear thin, and Stanley is mocked by other children because he is 'different', his mother comforts him: 'It is wrong to dislike people for their shapes. Or their religion, for that matter, or the colour of their skin.' In a suitably fanciful ending, Arthur comes to Stanley's rescue with a bicycle pump.

Tomi Ungerer's scratchy pen and ink drawings act as an emotional counterpoint to the understated text. Here we see Stanley's apparently unflappable parents initially stifling alarm, Doctor Dan looking befuddled, an increasingly resentful Arthur buried under a pile of encyclopaedias as he tries to become flat too, and two cocky and then 'quivery' thieves. The eccentric style catches the absurd in Brown's text and adds nuance to it.

If **Flat Stanley**'s longevity had been determined by an early review in **The New York Times**, it might not have survived to become the 'classic' it is today. 'One's doubts about this book are aroused by the name of its hero: Stanley Lambchop,' it begins! It goes on to lambast Brown's style as 'one of strained cleverness and second-rate witticism', concluding that 'in 'writing down' to children, the author has done them a disservice.' Generations of readers beg to differ. In Britain, Margery Fisher in **Growing Point** welcomed this episodic 'picture/storybook' as a 'masterpiece of logical nonsense' while Miriam Gross in the **Observer** delighted in how Ungerer's artwork 'shows the uses of being a two-dimensional boy' in this 'hilarious' story.

Over the next 30 years, Brown wrote five rather more conventional fantasies about Stanley and his family 'his works for children comprising some 125 pages in all! In 2003 ' the year of his death, the stories were re-published as early chapter books and re-imagined in a flatter, less edgy, cartoon style by American illustrator Scott Nash. By now, Stanley had an international following due, in part, to an award winning educational 'exchange' initiative ' the Flat Stanley Project, inspired by Stanley's postal trip to California (see www.flatterworlds.com [3]). But **Flat Stanley**'s enduring appeal ultimately lies in Brown's initial inspired joke and the absurd and poignant possibilities that a flattened boy opens up ' possibilities deserving of a Funny Prize.

Elizabeth Hammill OBE initiated and co-founded Seven Stories, the centre for children's books, of which she is currently a Founder Patron and Collection Trust trustee.



For younger readers a picture book edition of **Flat Stanley** illustrated by Scott Nash is now available (Egmont, 978 1 4052 0417 0, £3.99). Additional titles based on the stories by Jeff Brown include **Flat Stanley: The Japanese Ninja Surprise**, **Flat Stanley: The Big Mountain Adventure** and **Flat Stanley: The Great Egyptian Grave Robbery**. The original edition of **Flat Stanley** with illustrations by Tomi Ungerer (see black and white illustrations) is OP but may be available from Amazon.

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[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/elizabeth-hammill>

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