



# Two Children Tell: Nick And Humour ?That?s a funny one?

Article Author:

[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

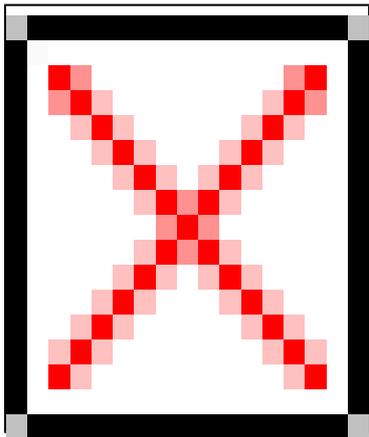
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Byline:

Nick and humour

In the latest of her series describing children?s early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** discusses what made her children laugh.

In studying my two children?s responses to their books, I discovered that a humour response is hard to catch. When you are reading aloud to the child, smiles and grins are often missed. You only catch and note the audible laugh or comment. Often it is what the children themselves do with the book ? how they play with it.



Mislabelling of all types was one of baby Nicholas? major ways to amuse others,

beginning at one year, one month (1y1m) with **Lucy and Tom's Day** (Shirley Hughes) where he named everything his big sister pointed to as ?bus?. In **Fish is Fish** (Leo Lionni) which is ambiguous anyway (with odd fish-like creatures from the fish-protagonist's imagination), he labelled each page?s fishy-creature ?bish?, but then ?bish?-ed while pointing to the endpapers as well, which are quite blank (1y6m). He was still doing this a year later, when he named all the animals in Robert Broomfield?s **Baby Animal ABC** as ?horsie?.

Sometimes he led the reader to do the mislabelling. In **Miffy?s Birthday** (Dick Bruna) he had labelled Miffy?s teddy ?Milkshake? at 2y3m, so his father continued with this substitution for the rest of the story.

Mislabelling makes a much more amusing joke if it goes against the imperative of rhyme as well. Gay?s *Look* is written in basic doggerel, which we were accustomed to read with a pause for Nicholas to fill in the relevant rhyme. It begins:

Here's a shy kitten

Soft and sweet

And here's a white lamb with

Four little black -

?wheels!? Nick supplied on one occasion (2y3m).

Rhymes themselves can play an important part in humour. Nick laughed every time we read **Millions of Cats** (Wanda Gag) at the rhyme which is interspersed, and similarly with the ?Plinkety plunk? rhyme in Russell Hoban?s **A Baby Sister for Frances**. Poems often have words whose sound amuses. Nick always laughed at the poem ?Big Brass Band? especially the lines ?ten tom-toms, tympani too? at 1y1m.

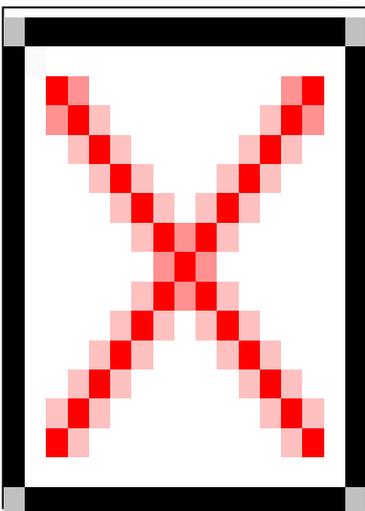
As Beverly Cleary says (**Horn Book**, 1982) ?There is always a laugh in the utterly familiar?. And indeed when he was first given a boiled egg to eat, as in **Lucy and Tom?s Day**, he was amused, or when the familiar ?Baa Baa Black Sheep? was begun in a new and unfamiliar nursery rhyme book. It is often the familiar in an incongruous setting. To his knowledge, only children wore socks, so ?One of the sergeants looks after their socks? was hilarious in Milne?s ?Buckingham Palace? at 1y10m (**When We were Very Young**). Reading **The Boy with 100 Cars**, J: who else takes cars to bed? N: Me!

In **Emma Quite Contrary** (Gunilla Wolde) Emma?s antics with her jeans on her head, or calling for another glass of water from bed, brought recognition and complicit laughs from both children at 2y3m and 5y6m. The subversive was also an element in their sharing of the **Asterix** word games (subversive because we adults didn?t enjoy reading the comic-style dialogue, so they were basically shared with each other ? Nick, between 5y10m and 11y, and Rebecca three years older).

To a child, the experience of misusing, or misunderstanding a word, must be common, so to be able to understand something when a character cannot is satisfying, empowering, and amusing. Piglet's ?Help help! a Horrible Heffalump!... Hoff, Hoff?? is funny for its sound, and for Piglet's anxiety, as much as for its mispronunciation, and amused both consistently once this chapter of Milne?s **Winnie-the-Pooh** was familiar (about 3y0m for each).

By far the most frequent source of humour in illustrations, at all ages, was the character who had to be searched for and found. This could take the form of one partially hidden under or in something, such as Peter under the carton in Jack Ezra Keat?s **Whistle for Willie** (1y5m), Micky in the bread dough in Sendak?s **In the Night Kitchen** 2y1m and 2y11m or the kittens located by their tails in Potter?s **Samuel Whiskers** (2y3m).

The book that caused the most laughter over all was **Wacky Wednesday** (Dr Seuss) referred to as ?my funny book? by



Nick at 2y5m. In this more and more ?wacky? things must be discovered on each page, and many of them were seen as wildly funny: the man driving his car from the back seat, for instance. The ?wacky? things are incongruous, hence funny, for a variety of reasons relating to social or physical reality. Some are impossible, whereas some are only impossible because we know how things should be, such as the pram with twenty babies in. This was always the first book they brought out to amuse visiting children, because they had fun spotting more and more whacky things together. It was shared hilarity.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids? Book](#) [3], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children?s literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Deedits: Two Children Tell**

(2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

Books mentioned:

**Lucy and Tom's Day**, Shirley Hughes, O/P

**Fish is Fish**, Leo Lionni, Andersen Press, 978-1-7834-4157-0, £6.99 pbk

**Miffy's Birthday**, Dick Bruna, Simon and Schuster, 978-1-4711-2076-3, £4.99 pbk

**A Baby Sister for Frances**, Russell Hoban and Lillian Hoban, O/P

**When We were Very Young**, A A Milne and E H Shepard, Egmont, 978-1-4052-1118-5, £7.99 pbk

**Winnie- the-Pooh**, A A Milne and E H Shepard, Egmont, 978-1-4052-1116-1, £7.99 pbk

**In the Night Kitchen**, Maurice Sendak, Red Fox, 978-0-0994-1747-7, £7.99 pbk

**Wacky Wednesday**, Dr Seuss, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0-0071-7516-1, £5.99 pbk

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