



# Taking Humour Seriously

Article Author:

[Betsy Byars](#) [1]

[82](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

**Betsy Byars** on what children find funny.

## Betsy Byars

I went to a school once, and I took a manuscript with me. I had just gotten it back, complete with editor's notes in the margin, and I showed the kids some of the comments, one of which was 'Make this funny!'. There was a lot of interest in this, and the general consensus was that the editor meant me to put in some jokes. If only it were so simple, for the truth is that there are far too many jokes in the world and far too little humour.

I have always been drawn to humour, but I am not a humorist. My books are serious, with comic episodes. The humour serves a dual purpose. It balances out the serious things. The tougher the theme, the more humour is needed - for my own relief as well as the reader's.

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The gap between what adults find funny and what kids think is funny is considerable. So I'm always looking for things that are funny to kids. When one of my daughters had some friends over, one of the boys noticed there were two cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. He got up on the piano bench and pretended to be Tarzan, attempting to swing from one to the other. It was very funny.

And so, in **The Eighteenth Emergency**, when Mouse Fawley looks up on his ceiling and sees a cobweb, he doesn't try to swing on it, but he had previously written UNSAFE FOR PUBLIC SWINGING and drawn an arrow to it. This opened up a whole facet of Mouse's personality. When he sees a crack in the wall, he writes, TO OPEN BUILDING TEAR ALONG THIS LINE, and I would never have thought of that on my own.

My son had a friend who did whale imitations. I was never privileged to see them, because Phil never did his imitations on request, but only when moved to do so. When this happened, the word would spread and kids would appear from blocks around to watch, helpless with laughter. 'What are the imitations like?' I asked my son. 'They're like - whales,' was his explanation. I sometimes found myself looking at Phil, the comic imitator of whales, wondering, but he looked back with his face in neutral, as all my son's friends did, and I could never imagine the imitations for myself. Years later, while writing **Cracker Jackson**, with Jackson's friend Percy doing the whale imitations, I did see it quite clearly, and my son was right - the imitations were like whales.

The forbidden is always funny, and usually the first kind of humour kids discover is bathroom humour. At first certain words are just plain hilarious, and the appeal of reducing one's friends to helpless laughter and, at the same time, shocking adults is considerable.

The funniest word in the vocabulary of an American six/seven year-old is 'underwear'. When I speak to their classes, I always read the opening sentence of **The Night Swimmers**. '*When the swimming pool lights were turned out and Colonel and Mrs Roberts had gone to bed, the Anderson kids came out of the bushes in their underwear.*'

It is such a successful sentence that I often have to repeat it. I have even been asked if I had any other funny sentences.

I reached my peak as a bathroom humorist in **The Two-Thousand-Pound Goldfish**. The goldfish has been flushed down the toilet, into the sewer, where it comes to weigh two thousand pounds and slurps five or six people to death. The soldiers are marching into the sewer to kill Bubbles, and Warren gets the idea that if everyone in the city flushed their toilets at, say, 10 o'clock, the floodgates would open and Bubbles would be swept out to sea *'where she could live the rest of her life in peace and harmony'*.

There follows a seven-page countdown in which the announcer entreats the listeners to flush their toilets. 'It's five minutes to ten. If you have more than one bathroom, get a neighbour to come flush with you.' *'It's four minutes to ten, open your windows, yell, "Flush!" to the people in the streets below.'* It takes two pages to get everyone in their bathrooms, and the final countdown is *'five-four-three-two-one-FLUSH!'* Sometimes I read this to classes and usually I never have to actually say the word 'flush', because the entire room will make the sound of a toilet flushing. The thought of 50 kids flushing like toilets may not thrill you, but it has never failed to move me.

Bad grammar is more amusing than good grammar. My particular weakness has always been for the double negative. I love it. Some-times I use it not to be funny, but to make the character's speech more authentic. In **Trouble River**, the grandmother says, *'We ain't got no chance . . .'* and *'I didn't come no one thousand miles to ...'* That was not meant to be funny, and it actually turned out to be unfunny because I got letters from English teachers chastising me for reinforcing the unfortunate speech patterns which they were trying to change.

Used properly, the double negative is amusing. In **The Eighteenth Emergency**, Mouse remembers when the boys decided, during a recess lull, to put the girls in the school trash cans. There's a long screaming charge, which ends with Mouse having Viola Angotti pinned against the garbage cans. He realises he's not going to be able to get Viola in the garbage can without a great deal of help.

*'He called again, "Come on you guys, get the lid off this garbage can, will you?"'*

*And then, when he said that, Viola Angotti had taken two steps forward. She said, "Nobody's putting me in no garbage can."*

*He cried, "Hey, you guys!" It was a plea. "Where are you?"'*

*And then Viola Angotti had taken one more step, and with a faint sigh she had socked him in the stomach so hard that he had doubled over and lost his lunch.*

*As she walked past his crumpled body she had said again, "Nobody's putting me in no garbage can." It had sounded like one of the world's basic truths. The sun will rise. The tides will flow.*

*Nobody's putting Viola Angotti in no garbage can.'*

When I was in school, the simile and the metaphor were things I encountered on English worksheets. 'Find two similes and one metaphor in the second chapter of **Moby Dick**.' A simile in a children's book must be within the child's reach. The Bingo Brown books lend themselves to the simile, because the reader accepts that these are Bingo's comparisons, rather than mine. When Bingo has a mixed-sex conversation with Melissa, it's *'like the olympics of mixed-sex conversations'*. When he lies down on his Smurf sheets, he's *'as comfortable as if he were lying onreal Smurfs'*. When he takes off half his eyebrow during his first shave, the remaining eyebrow has *'a suggestive snarl, like the curl of Elvis Presley's lip'*.

Children need parody, just as adults do, because it is a form of humorous protest. The essential point in the use of parody, I think, is to prick a balloon, to show how ridiculous or even how painful some element of our daily life is.

My favourite target is the *National Enquirer*. Among the headlines Bingo Brown fears to appear in is **BOY LOVES**

TWO GIRLS FOR INFINITY - SETS WORLD RECORD, but in **The Midnight Fox**, long before I was aware of the *Enquirer*, I parodied headlines. Petie Burkis writes of a personal humiliation at a park - BOY FALLS DOWN BANK WHILE GIRL ONLOOKERS CHEER - and then goes on to write a story that sounds like it had come from a real newspaper.

TV lends itself particularly well to parody, which is one of the reasons I enjoyed writing **The TV Kid**. I relished the creation of 'Give It a Spin', the game show where *you* pick your prizes and we see that you take them, and the commercial for 'Friend', the lifesize doll that allows you to have someone to talk to. *'With Friend, you'll never have to go to the movies alone. And remember, Friend comes with a special ID card that lets him enter all movie theaters and sports events for half price.'* My favourite was a commercial that Lennie imagines for Fail-Ease, the tablet that eases failure and makes you less afraid to fail the next time. *'Yes, for the nagging relief from failure, take Fail-Ease, the failure reliever that requires no prescription. Don't we wish.'*

Actually it is not I who thinks up these parodies and similes. It is a character in the book, in the same way that while I could never write a country-western song, I can create a character who can write **'My Angel Went to Heaven in a DC-3'**. I cannot write poetry, but I can create a character who, without batting an eye, can turn out such a complicated rhyme as 'I love the roof and that's the troof.'

There's a whole area of what I would call negative humour - insults, sarcasm, ridicule. Children, in real life, dread ridicule so much, they guard against it. If they are afraid they won't get an invitation they say, 'I wouldn't go to the party if I was invited'. If scorned for sloppiness, they become twice as sloppy to show they don't care.

But they like insults as long as someone else is the target. When I needed insults in **The Burning Questions of Bingo Brown**, I got a book of insults, just as Billy Wentworth did, and I dealt them out with the same ruthlessness as he did.

*"Mamie Lou, you are a perfect ten. Your face is a two, your body is a two, your legs are a two -" Mamie Lou wisely didn't wait around to hear what her other twos were.'*

*'Harriet, you may not have invented ugliness, but you sure are the local distributor.'*

*'Miss Fanucci is so ugly that when she goes to the zoo she has to buy two tickets - one to get in and one to get out.'*

Since Miss Fanucci overhears her insult, that puts a blessed end to the insults.

Understatement is a form of humour easily lost on kids. The knack of producing humour by using understatement is to finish a sentence with a word or phrase that is milder than the listener expected, anticlimactic. Kids have an innate ability for this kind of humour and do it without even trying. My favourite letter was written, not to me, but to Laura Ingalls Wilder, and I used it in **The Burning Questions of Bingo Brown**. *'Dear Laura Ingalls Wilder, I know that you are dead, but please write if you can and let me know where you get your ideas.?'*

In Max Eastman's **Ten Commandments of the Comic Art**, Commandment Three is 'Be effortless'. I especially like that, because it is almost my sole commandment, my goal in writing. I work on something until it looks as if I haven't worked on it at all. If it looks as if I've worked on it, I go back and work some more. But it's especially important in humour. Humour demands natural-ness and simplicity. To appear spontaneous may require a week's work. More than any other type of writing, humour has got to resemble play, which is really what it is.

**Betsy Byars** lives in South Carolina and has written over 30 children's books. Details of the titles mentioned in this article are:

**Eighteenth Emergency**, Bodley Head, 0 370 10924 4, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 030863 6, £2.50 pbk

**Cracker Jackson**, Puffin, 0 14 031881 1, £2.99 pbk

**The Night Swimmers**, Puffin, 0 14 031409 1, £2.99 pbk

**The Two-Thousand-Pound Goldfish**, Puffin, 0 14 031607 8, £2.50 pbk

**The TV Kid**, Puffin, 0 14 031065 7, £2.50 pbk

**The Burning Questions of Bingo Brown**, Bodley Head, 0 370 31186 8, £6.99; Puffin, 0 14 034319 9, £2.99 pbk

**Trouble River** is out of print.

Her most recent titles are both published by Bodley Head and cost £8.99 each:

**Coast to Coast**, 0 370 31820 X

**The Moon and Me**, 0 370 31827 7 - That rare offering, an autobiography of a children's writer written for her readers. Warm **BfK** recommendations.

Page Number:

4

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