The Zena Sutherland Lecture

What's So Funny, Mr. Scieszka?

BY JON SCIESZKA

The voice flew across the room and nailed me to the back of my seat.

"What's so funny, Mr. Scieszka?"

The voice belonged to Sister Margaret Ann. And it had just flown across our fifth-grade religion class at St. Luke's Elementary School to find me in what I had thought was the safety of the back row.

I knew the correct answer to this question was, "Nothing, sister."

"I'm sorry, sister," was also a time-tested and very good reply.

And nine times out of ten, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, I would have used one of those answers. But that day something happened. That day I reached some existential fork in the road.

My friend and back-row co-conspirator, Tim Kovalsik, had just told me the funniest joke I had ever heard. The fact that he had told it while Sister Margaret Ann was droning on about our future options of heaven and hell only made it funnier.

Now I was called out.

I saw the two life paths laid out clearly before me. Down the one path of the quick apology and standard answer lay the good grade for religion class. Down the other path lay the possibility of a very big laugh. A good grade in religion class is always a good thing in Catholic school. No arguing that. But this was a really funny joke, and I knew why it was funny. I was torn between going for the A and going for the laugh. Both were within my grasp.

So when Sister Margaret Ann asked the inevitable follow-up question, "Would you like to share it with the rest of the class?" I chose my life's path.

"Well . . . there's this guy who wants to be a bell ringer," I begin, "but he doesn't have any arms."

Sister Margaret Ann's eyes pop open wider than I have ever seen them. The whole class turns to look at me, and at the train wreck about to happen. Even my pal Tim Kovalsik is shaking his head at this point. Nobody in the history of St. Luke's Elementary School has ever volunteered to "share it with the rest of the class." But I feel it. I have to do it. It is my destiny.

"The priest who is looking for a good bell ringer says, 'You can't ring the bells. You don't have any arms.'"

The faces of my fellow fifth graders are looking a bit wavy and blurry. I suddenly understand the phrase *sea of faces*.

"'I don't need arms,' says the bell-ringing guy. 'Watch this.' And he runs up the bell tower and starts bouncing his face off the bells and making beautiful music."

Half of the class laughs. I'm not sure if it's out of nervousness or pity. But it's a lot of laughs.

Sister Margaret Ann's eyes open, impossibly, wider.

Light floods the classroom. I can't really see anybody now. I can only feel the punch line building. I head toward the light.

"So the bell-ringing guy goes to finish his song with one last smack of his face, but this time he misses the bell and falls right out of the tower. He lands on the ground and is knocked out. A whole crowd of villagers gathers around him."

The whole class has gathered around me. For a confirmed low-profile student like myself, it is a feeling of almost unbelievable power mixed with terror.

"'Who is this guy?' the villagers ask."

I feel the whole world pause for just a single beat, like it always does before a good punch line.

"'I don't know his name,' says the priest. 'But his face rings a bell.'"

I don't remember the grade I got in fifth-grade religion class, but I do remember the laugh I got. It was huge. It was the whole class. It was out-of-control hysterical. It was glorious.

So tonight, from the relative safety of this podium and a distance of forty years, I'd like to continue to answer Sister Margaret Ann's question. Because in looking back over my work, trying to make some retrospective sense of my writing for kids, I've realized that each of my books is in some way another piece of the answer to the question, "What's so funny, Mr. Scieszka?"

I'd also like to accept the invitation of Sister Margaret Ann's second question and share with you, the rest of the class, what's so funny.

I BELIEVE FUNNY is good. I believe funny is important. And I may just be rationalizing the path I chose back in fifth grade, but I also believe funny is never given the respect it deserves.

Scholars and historians more learned than I have pondered this problem for ages. Why is tragedy seen as being more substantial than comedy? Why do we believe sadness is a more valid and a deeper emotion than happiness? Why is it that funny stuff never wins the awards? (What was the last funny movie to win an Academy Award? Or, closer to home, in our world of children's books—what was the last funny book to win a Newbery?)

One of my favorite funny writers, a fellow by the name of E. B. White, put it best in the introduction to his *Subtreasury of American Humor*.

"The world likes humor," wrote E. B., "but treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious."

And it's interesting to note that Mr. White was decorated with a Newbery Honor laurel for his book *Charlotte's Web* but received only Brussels sprouts for his much funnier and much more insightful book *Is Sex Necessary?: Or, Why You Feel the Way You Do*.

But don't take my word for it. I'll quote a passage from each book. Then you decide for yourself.

From *Charlotte's Web*, chapter three:

> The barn was very large. It was very old. It smelled of hay and it smelled of manure.

From *Is Sex Necessary?*, chapter four:

> The sexual revolution began with Man's discovery that he was not attractive to Woman, as such. The lion had his mane, the peacock his gorgeous plumage, but Man found himself in a three-button sack suit. His masculine appearance not only failed to excite Woman, but in many cases it only served to bore her. The result was that Man found it necessary to develop attractive personal traits to offset his dull appearance. He learned to say funny things. He learned to smoke, and blow smoke rings. He learned to earn money. This would have been a solution to his difficulty, but in the course of making himself attractive to Woman by developing himself mentally, he inadvertently became so intelligent an animal that he saw how comical the whole situation was.

Now I ask you—which passage is funnier? Which passage has more insight into the human condition? I rest my case.

We could delve deeper into our collective psyche and debate further the relative merits of comedy and tragedy, but I say we just give E. B. White another quote and get on with the promised business of answering the question, What's so funny, Mr. Scieszka?

Once again, from White's introduction to his *Subtreasury of American Humor* (and no, that's not the only funny book I have. It just seemed like the quotes from this one would be more literary and in keeping with the occasion than quotes from Jon Stewart's *Naked Pictures of Famous People* or Will Cuppy's *How to Attract the Wombat*):

> Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.

Which is exactly why schools and teachers are not so keen on humor as a legitimate form of writing—it's so difficult to dissect. Teachers love to dig into tragedies and problem novels, in part because they can be explained and illuminated by discussion.

We can talk about why Charlotte has to die.

We can discuss why Travis has to shoot his beloved dog, Old Yeller.

We can analyze why the boys behave the way they do in the *Lord of the Flies*.

We can explain why we cry when Jess loses his friend Leslie in *Bridge to Terabithia*.

But it's much more difficult to explain or discuss what's so funny about anything. The very nature of humor works against explanation. In many cases, the old adage is true—you either "get it" or you don't.

I can only imagine myself deconstructing my fifth-grade religion class: "Well, sister, the bell ringer is funny because the joke uses the literal meaning of *ringing a bell* instead of the meaning *jogging the memory*. And then the image of the guy bonking his face on the bell is . . . well . . . funny. And the other funny part is that you don't understand this until all at once at the end when you hear the punch line."

How's that for killing the humor and dragging its innards out all over the place?

It might be interesting to note here that the way people usually share humor is to repeat it. You re-tell the joke, the sketch, or the funny line just as it was. The classic example of this phenomenon is the eighth-grade boys who have discovered the humor of Monty Python. From them you don't get a deep analysis of why it's funny

that a pet store salesman might try to convince a customer that he did not, in fact, sell him a dead parrot. You get big chunks of the thing itself—intact, verbatim, faithfully memorized. You don't get an explanation of the historical antagonism between the French and the English. You get, "I fart in your general direction." The humor is in the *exact telling*.

Which brings us to another challenge of sharing humor . . . which reminds me of one of my favorite jokes:

A guy gets thrown into prison. His first day there, one of the other prisoners yells out, "Number 72!" Everybody cracks up laughing. Another prisoner looks all around, then says, "Number 17." Prisoners fall down holding their sides they are laughing so hard.

The new guy turns to another prisoner and asks, "What's going on? How come these guys are calling out numbers and laughing?"

An old con turns to him and says, "There's only one joke book in the prison library. So everybody's read the book. We learned all the jokes and used to just tell the punch lines. But since the jokes are all numbered, after a while we even dropped the punch lines. Now we just tell them by number. It saves a lot of time."

So the new guy listens to everybody telling jokes by number. Then he goes to the prison library and reads the book. He memorizes all of the jokes and their numbers. A week later in the lunchroom, he waits for the perfect moment, then yells out, "Number 33!"

Nobody even cracks a smile.

Our guy turns to the old con.

"What happened?"

The old con shrugs and says, "Some people just can't tell a joke."

And isn't that the truth. I never realized what a sophisticated and complex activity joke-telling is until I was a second-grade teacher and we had Tell Your Favorite Joke Day. I think my idea had been to help kids work on shaping a narrative in miniature—setting the scene, using dialogue, introducing conflict, then resolving it with a funny punch line.

That was the theory, anyway. I set up a microphone from the AV room. We all dressed in our best standup outfits. We wrote and rewrote favorite jokes. But when it came time for the second graders to actually get up in front of the rest of the class and tell their jokes, it was a complete disaster.

Half of the joke tellers couldn't remember how to start their joke. Others couldn't remember the crucial setup details, and would loop back around in the telling to fill them in later, like

after the punch line. Punch lines themselves were changed, mangled, or completely forgotten. But the best (or worst) performance was the last.

Justin had worked on his very funny joke about a duck that goes into a drugstore to buy chapstick. The duck doesn't have any money, so he tells the clerk to just put it on his bill. But for some reason . . . and now that I think of it, maybe it was God, after waiting all those years, finally punishing me for telling the bell ringer joke in religion class . . . for some reason, just as a group of prospective parents led by a guide showing them around the school came to the door of our classroom, Justin decided to throw out his duck joke and launch into a new and—shall we say—much less appropriate joke that he had obviously just heard from an older sibling.

"A guy in a hotel has to go to the bathroom real bad," began Justin, his voice projecting clearly through the microphone. "So he asks a man where the bathroom is. 'Upstairs,' says the man."

The Parent Tour Group is leaning in the door, now looking interested.

It's a great setup, well told. But I'm a little worried about where it might be going.

"So the guy goes upstairs and he can't find the bathroom,"

booms Justin into the microphone. "Oh, and downstairs there is a really big fan."

Now the Tour Group is looking very interested.

And now I am very worried, because the crucial detail of the fan has told me the punch line Justin is heading for. I fiddle with the amplifier volume knobs. I squeal the feedback. Nothing can stop Justin. He is loving having an audience, and now milking the joke by having the guy look for the bathroom in three, four, five different rooms.

Lucky for me, the Tour Group loses interest. They go down the hall to a much more predictable first-grade classroom.

Justin soldiers on. "And then the guy goes into a room that only has a hole in the floor. So he goes to the bathroom in it. And when he comes downstairs the other man says, "Someone went to the bathroom all over the fan."

The whole class of second graders cracks up.

I kill the power to the microphone and thank God for the difficult and complex challenge that is joke-telling. And the spazzy memory of second graders.

Because, as you may have guessed, the real joke goes: After the guy goes to the bathroom in the hole in the floor, he comes back downstairs and is shocked. The entire room is covered with crap. The desk clerk looks at our guy, the only clean man in the room, and asks, "Where were you when the shit hit the fan?"

Fortunately for my teaching career, I was saved by the complex challenge of humor—specifically, the challenge of remembering a punch line.

All right. No more joking around. I better get down to business. I'm looking for laurels here, not Brussels sprouts. Let's get started dragging the frog's innards out for examination and answering the question of what's so funny.

GROWING UP WITH five brothers and no sisters is funny. I think that's where I first got started on this funny business. In fact, I *know* that's where I got started. Growing up in that group, you either laughed . . . or died.

I was fortunate enough to be the second oldest of the six Scieszka boys. As one of the oldest, I got more parental attention (not always a good thing) but fewer hand-me-downs. I have a card in my scrapbook announcing my birth as "Lou and Shirley Scieszka's new addition to the Tappa-Kegga-Milk Fraternity."

That's kind of funny.

My youngest brother Jeff (number six) never got a scrapbook. I think my mom was just tired of the whole thing by then. Jeff has a Ziploc bag with some pictures in it. And most of the pictures aren't even of him.

Now that's really funny.

Growing up with younger brothers, I was sometimes asked to watch them. So I did. I watched them dig up the houseplants. I watched them chew on the dog. I watched them play in the toilet.

Kind of funny.

One day when my older brother Jim and I were watching the littler ones, Jeff and Brian, we were so entertained that we realized we could probably charge other kids to watch, too. We charged the kids from our block a dime each to watch Brian eat cigarette butts.

Very funny.

From Catholic school (which you've already seen can be very funny), I went on to attend high school at Culver Military Academy in Culver, Indiana. Now you might not think of a military academy as a particularly funny place. But there is something about a bunch of guys dressed in identical outfits marching to breakfast in the dead of the freezing gray Indiana winter that struck me as very funny. I think it might have been more of that "laugh . . . or die" reaction.

An interest in science and my mom's mantra that "doctors make a lot of money and don't have to work very hard" led me to pursue a college course of pre-med. I thought it was kind of funny in anatomy class when the professor would lecture on the precise location of emotions within the brain. (Though no one else laughed.) And in my comparative anatomy class I started writing marginally funny pieces like "Ode to a Disarticulated Trout Skull" (with its something like 28 individual bones).

But what I later realized was *really* funny was the fact that my mom's mantra of "doctors make a lot of money and don't have to work very hard" had nothing to do with a career choice for me. That was just her own particular view from her work—as a registered nurse.

I dropped the med school plan late in senior year. "Late" as in "med boards late," but that's okay—I learned a lot of science. I went to New York to get an MFA in creative writing. That was kind of funny. But after I got out in the world with my Columbia University Master of Fine Arts in Writing degree, I was perfectly credentialed to do exactly what I then did—paint apartments. *Very* funny.

But the funniest thing I ever did was to teach school. For ten years I taught a little bit of everything, from first-grade homeroom to eighth-grade algebra. And it absolutely changed my life. Because it was there in school that I rediscovered how smart and funny kids are. In school I found my true audience. In school my kids taught me about the importance of play.

Kids are great at playing. That's what they do best. When I was a kid, we had specific clothes we wore to go out and play. We had clothes we called our "play clothes." When we got home from school we took off our school clothes, put on our play clothes, and went out to play. That was our job. We played.

Teaching in elementary school, and watching kids in action, I came to appreciate how effortlessly kids learn when they play. Babies learn to talk without taking multiple choice talking tests. Toddlers learn to toddle without writing toddling essays. How do they do it? By playing around.

The more experienced I became as a teacher, and the more I saw kids learning by playing, the more I realized that a lot of the time I was just getting in the way. I learned from my students how to inspire them, engage them, give them the tools to explore, and then get out of the way and trust them.

The single best day I ever had as a teacher, I came down with laryngitis. I got to school in the morning with a little bit of a sore throat and grand plans to lecture my third-grade math classes on the amazing connections between multiplication, division, and fractions. During morning announcements I started croaking. First period reading I whispered. By second period math, I had nothing.

But I so wanted to explain to my students the great revelation I had been building up to all week. If you knew something as simple as 5 plus 5 is 10, then you know that 2 times 5 is 10, you know 10 divided by 5 is 2. You know 10 divided by 2 is 5. You know half of 10 is 5, one fifth of 10 is 2.

You know a galaxy of mathematics from the smallest fact, I wanted to tell them. I wanted to be the star of this educational inspiration. But I couldn't croak out a single word. I tried. I scribbled problems on the board. I drew arrows. The kids were confused. I pantomimed divisions and fractions. The kids became very confused.

My amazing math lecture was in ruins. I gave up. I brought out the colored wooden math blocks the kids always liked to goof around with. Kids started playing around with the blocks, and that's when it happened. Somebody built the simple pattern of

way. I learned to inspire instead of lecture. I learned to trust play. That philosophy is at the heart of everything I write for kids. I want my readers to laugh, of course. But then I want them to question, to argue, to wonder—what if? I want them to play. I want them to learn for themselves.

THE OTHER BIG INFLUENCES on what I find funny (besides growing up with five brothers, going to Catholic school, dressing like 800 other guys at a military academy, and naming all 28 bones of a trout skull) are the books that I grew up reading.

The first book I remember was Dr. Seuss's *If I Ran the Circus*. What a goof. What a kick. What unabashed play. I also loved *The Carrot Seed* where the little guy wants to plant his seed and grow a carrot, but no one believes it will work. He plants it anyway, waters it, and it grows up to be a carrot so big he has to cart it off in a wheelbarrow. But my true favorite of favorites was, and still is, *Go, Dog. Go!*

When I read *Go, Dog. Go!* now, I have to wonder what kind of weird little Zen monk of a kid I must have been to be so taken by "The green dog is up. The yellow dog is down." I think it was the pure and solid "is-ness" of the story. The green dog was up. The yellow dog was down. And then there was the sheer manic energy. Different colored dogs driving around in cars? Of course! The recurring duet of the dog asking, "Do you like my party hat?" Why not? And where are they all going? To a double-page-spread party in the top of a tree. Perfect!

That was my world of reading. That's what I first thought was funny. So when I went to school and we started reading about Dick and Jane and Sally and Spot, I didn't know what to make of that even more bizarre world.

Here's the first story from *Fun with Dick and Jane*:

Dick said, "Look, look.
Look up.
Look up, up, up."

Jane said, "Run, run.
Run, Dick, run.
Run and see."

"Look, look," said Dick.
"See Sally.
See funny Sally and Father."

two yellow blocks that were 5 units long, and matched them with the single orange colored block that was 10 units long.

"Hey, look at this," said one third grader. "This shows all the problems up on the board. Two of the fives are ten, ten divided by 5 is 2, half of ten is 5..."

"One fifth of ten is two," said somebody at another table.

They looked at me. I nodded.

"And if you called that orange one hundred, then you could say half of one hundred is fifty," said someone else.

"Or half of one thousand is five hundred," chimed in another mathematician.

"Half of one hundred thousand is fifty thousand," said another.

And they were off and running—building, describing, and writing down that galaxy of mathematics I had been planning to brilliantly lecture them about. And the best part of all was that absolutely no one was looking at me for the answers. Every kid in the room was playing like mad, making their own connections, finding their own discoveries.

My finest hour as a teacher. I was completely invisible. Now *that* is funny, Mr. Scieszka.

So from teaching I learned to respect kids as natural learners, to supply them with the tools to learn, and then get out of the

"See, see," said Sally.
"Sally is up, up , up.
This is fun for Sally."

Funny, but not really funny-ha-ha. Not Mr. Scieszka funny.

My other great early funny literary influences were *Mad* magazine, Rocky and Bullwinkle cartoons, and Sluggo comics in the newspaper. But at the same time I read fairy tales and fables and myths and history, and encyclopedias and joke books and the back of cereal boxes. Later I discovered the literary equivalents of *Go, Dog. Go!* in Kafka and Borges, Cervantes and Diderot, Faulkner and Joyce; humorists like Perleman, Benchley, Ring Lardner, and Will Cuppy; contemporary goofers of fictional forms like John Barth and Thomas Pynchon.

And I think what really started my career of writing for kids was my bringing that combination of all of my favorite influences and fictions into my second-grade classroom. At story time, I would tell my second graders my versions of funny bits from *Don Quixote* and *Finnegans Wake*. I'd mix those up with fairy tales, shaggy dog jokes, and the story of a guy who woke up one morning and discovered he was a bug. Kafka for kids. They loved it.

I took a year off from teaching to write stories for kids, and wrote with the idea of bringing that same thing I enjoyed—that mix of literary influences, comic book satire, and an unwavering belief in the intelligence of kids, to children's books.

The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs! is my picture book take on the unreliable narrator. It's a tribute to Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, Vladimir Nabokov's crazy narrator in *Pale Fire*, and every car commercial you've ever seen. It's what happens when anyone tells a story. It's what happened when any one of the six Scieszka brothers told their version of how the living room couch got broken. The storyteller ends up looking pretty good.

The Frog Prince, Continued combines two of my favorite things—fairy tales and messing with the conventions of storytelling. What if the story started where most stories end? My kids loved to learn rules by breaking them. And thanks to my Catholic school and military academy upbringing, I knew plenty of rules for breaking.

In *The Stinky Cheese Man*, I loved taking the rule-breaking I started with in *The Frog Prince* to outrageous extremes. The initial idea came to me because my daughter Casey's favorite story was "The Gingerbread Man." I read that story to her a million times. And then I snapped. I wondered, What if the little old lady ran out of gingerbread? What if she had to make the little guy out of some-

thing else? What if she made him out of very Stinky Cheese? Now that's funny, Mr. Scieszka, I said to myself.

Then I went to work to systematically deconstruct fairy tales and storytelling in every way possible. My great literary heroes for *The Stinky Cheese Man* are Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. They did it all before me: subverting the telling of the tale, stops and starts, missing characters, backwards plots, conflict derailed, resolution forgotten.

My Time Warp Trio books came directly out of my experience in the classroom. Trying to help kids make that difficult leap from easy readers to full-fledged chapter books, I was always looking for exciting, fast-paced, short-chapter, funny books to motivate my kids to want to make the huge effort that it takes to learn to read. So I wrote them myself. Kind of like the *Carrot Seed* kid.

As I look back over my writing now, I realize that the most elemental feature of humor that I find so funny is the friction between storytelling form and unlikely content. It's the deep laugh that comes out of playing around with form and content in new and unexpected ways.

Math Curse is the book that probably most obviously illustrates how I find the friction of storytelling form and content funny. After I had written all of the fairy tale twists, the publishing company sales force was, of course, eager for more of the same. If I had listened to the urgings of the sales force, I would be standing before you today reading from *The True Story of Cinderella*, *The True Story of Sleeping Beauty*, *The True Story of Every Fairy Tale*, and probably *The True Story of the Children's Book Author Who Beat Himself Senseless to Avoid Writing Another True Story Book*. Ever since I taught eighth-grade algebra, I had wanted to write a funny math book. It took me years to come up with the right narrative form to tell the story of a kid overwhelmed by math being everywhere. I played around with all kinds of different ideas. None of them seemed quite right. But the minute I tried telling the math-tortured kid's story in the form of math problems, I knew I had found the perfect deep and funny combination.

After *Math Curse*, I must have tried to write a funny true engaging science story at least fifty-three different ways. None of them worked. But I kept playing around with the idea. And once again, when I finally I stumbled on the idea of telling the kid's story as science poetry, the funny friction between the poetic form and the scientific content told me this was right. *Science Verse* is also a tribute to another one of my favorite funny writers—Lewis Carroll. We all

know that he wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. But what most people don't realize is that a lot of the seemingly random nonsense verses in *Alice* are parodies. The Carroll parodies have become so well known that the originals have been forgotten.

When the Duchess sings a lullaby to her pig baby in *Alice*, not many readers are thinking of G.W. Langford's poem *Speak Gently*, which begins:

Speak gently! It is better far
To rule by love than fear;
Speak gently; let no harsh words mar
The good we might do here!

The lullaby of Carroll's Duchess is funny by itself:

Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes;
He only does it to annoy,
Because he knows it teases.

So I thought to myself, Wouldn't it be so funny (and a little bit mind-bending), Mr. Scieszka, if, as a tribute to Lewis Carroll, you wrote a parody of a poem by the master of parody? So, from the back of an Oreos package and a Cheerios box, I give you *Gobblegooky*:

'Twas fructose, and the vitamins
Did zinc and dye (red #8).
All poly were the thiamins,
And the carbohydrate....

Alice in Wonderland, *Charlotte's Web*, beloved fairy tales, classic fables, history, science, poetry, art... what sacred cow will this madman attack next? Thank you for asking. I'm always on the lookout for something old that can be tweaked into something new. I'm always looking for that way to intrigue, entertain, and inspire readers.

I'd like to thank the Zena Sutherland Lecture committee for giving me the laurel of asking me to present this speech. I would also be glad to accept the Brussels sprouts... if you promise to honor the intelligence of kids, give a little more credit to humor, and remember to play.

That's what's so funny to Mr. Scieszka. And I thank you for letting me share it with you.

Jon Scieszka delivered the Zena Sutherland Lecture, from which this article is adapted, on May 6, 2005, in Chicago, Illinois.