

Book review

Cross, Julie (2011). *Humour in Contemporary Junior Literature*. New York: Routledge.

When searching for a title for her book, Julie Cross made an excellent decision. *Humour in Contemporary Junior Literature* is a title which catches the attention of the reader for multiple reasons. Firstly, it starts with the word *humour* which in itself creates associations in the reader's cognitive map close to the notions of amusement and entertainment. Then she continues with the word *contemporary*, making us sigh with relief that the content will be relatively close to us in term of up-to-dateness. By getting to the third word in the title, *junior*, the reader's imaginative skills are already activated, which then are fully engaged with the last word, *literature* – hence the promise of the title: we are going to have a good time reading this book.

If, however, we are the kind of reader who has a history of selecting their reading based on catchy titles and later regretting these decisions, we are welcome to read the overview on the back cover of the book. Most certainly, our suspicion about the “misleading” title will vanish. What is more, our level of curiosity is probably going to increase to the point after which there is no turning back – we would just simply let the urge manifest itself in our immediate immersion in the book. All joking aside, I am generalising here for a good reason: the book, based on the overview on the back cover, promises way more than “just” thorough analyses of humorous texts with a vigorous academic approach. It creates a gateway between the disciplines of literature and humour theory; it uses pragmatic analysis to determine specific functions of humour in contemporary junior literature; it deals with the cultural and social aspects (and implications) of attitudes towards children and childhood in general, as well as it shows that there might be a connection between how children conceptualize power and ideology based on certain humorous texts; and last but not least, it provides a theoretical framework of how these analyses can be conducted. Let the immersion begin.

The book consists of an extensive introduction, five thematically well-separated chapters and a conclusion, which also functions as the last proof of the author's argument(s), since it also contains an analysis of a contemporary text. The chapters are structured in a way so that it is possible for readers to read them based on their interest and not necessarily in order. If one decides to read the book this way, the clear understanding of the chapters' subject matter is reinforced by a detailed introduction and conclusion in each case. The only thing I miss from the book (from a structural perspective) is a more detailed table of contents indicating the subsections with page numbers.

Even if we want to start with a chapter whose title caught our attention and curiosity, it is highly recommended to read the introduction, since it is essential for multiple reasons: it starts with a clear description of the aim of the book through the introduction of the author's arguments; it explains the approach the author used in reviewing the relevant literature; it contains an extensive overview of the three main theories of humour (relief, superiority and incongruity); then it turns to developmental theories of children's humour as well as the literary criticism of children's humorous fiction; the introduction also functions as a clear explanation of the terminology and notions used by the author with a high emphasis on those

formulated by her (e.g. low and high forms of humour, new compounds of humour, the emergent paradigm, types of subversive/transgressive humour, etc.); and finally, it contains a very useful structural overview.

The first chapter, “The ‘tradition’ of humorous transgression in everyday-life fiction” is mostly (but not only) a historical overview of approaches to humour through literature, and it is also an introduction of the first type of the transgressive character who is not managing society’s norms well. It provides a context to humour analysis mostly in the domestic and school settings. The chapter also contains a subsection about slapstick humour and simple verbal humour respectively where the diachronic approach is emphasised. The reader is also introduced to the idea that humour is often used as a didactic tool, which – from the point of view of the author’s main argument – plays a central role in child development, especially by using it to teach facts as well as improve and encourage literacy. Later in the chapter, the relief theory of humour is used as a theoretical background to the concept of humorous transgression in everyday-life fiction which is followed by the investigation of cruel humour. The author ends the first chapter by showing how the emergent paradigm is manifested in humorous irony of narration.

Chapter two, “Superiority humour within fantasy: ‘Ingenuous’ anthropomorphised animal-child characters and ‘ingenious’ child detectives”, focuses on how one can use different concepts of superiority humour (e.g. romantic, negative, benign superiority humour) to examine the two subgenres of fantasy stated in the title. It also introduces another character type, the humorous character who cannot adjust to society’s norms. The idea of the emergent paradigm is also present in the second chapter in connection to humorous anthropomorphised animal fiction, where inclusive humour and high forms of humour are discussed through examples. The chapter’s remaining part deals with fiction putting the humorous detective and the secret agent in focus, and it ends with the introduction of inclusive humour and compounds of humour (as the combination of high and low forms).

The third chapter, “‘New Wave Nonsense’ and the tradition of Classic Nonsense”, uses the incongruity theory of humour as a theoretical basis. The chapter’s introduction is followed by a longer section of definitions of terms, which I personally found truly useful not just throughout the chapter, but in understanding the complex ideas presented in the entire book. The chapter focuses on both the classic and new wave nonsense as well as on the surreal, the absurd, and most comprehensively – satire. This chapter presents Cross’ second and third type of subversive humour, that is, the “threat of the strange” and “the comic grotesque”, respectively. Both are clearly explained on numerous examples (e.g. Ungerer’s 1973 *I Am Papa Snap and These Are My Favourite No Such Stories*, or McNaughton’s 1987 *There’s an Awful Lot of Weirdos in Our Neighbourhood*). The chapter contains a subsection about the changes of our perception of childhood and adulthood through time, and it ends by connecting black humour to nonsense.

Chapter four, “Gendered humour: Clever girls and ‘clever’ boys”, is probably the most important one from a psychological and/or sociocultural point of view. For this very reason, it has a slightly different approach as opposed to the first three chapters. It starts with a detailed investigation of the notion of (*plaisir*) femininity – as constructed based on the traditional, ideal womanhood of the nineteenth century. The chapter continues with specific language-based humour for girls and with how other models of femininity are present in different humorous texts. It also deals with other kinds of female subjectivities, for example, in Pielichaty’s Simone books (e.g. Pielichaty 1999). The fourth chapter can essentially be divided into two major parts, since everything mentioned so far about the feminine is examined from the point of view of the masculine as well – the second part, containing various types of humour, such as anti-authoritarian or visual-style slapstick.

The last chapter of the book, “‘Funny and fearful’: The comic Gothic and incongruity”, introduces Cross’ fourth type of subversive/transgressive humour: “comic irony”. The chapter is mostly based on the incongruity approach, and it provides numerous arguments for the emergent paradigm. It starts with the definition of the hybrid comic gothic, which is followed by pointing out the relevance of theatrical humour and the parody of melodrama and self-conscious narrators in the context of gothic texts. The chapter continues with a discussion of textual irony in its many forms and then ends with an extensive overview of the connection between black humour and the grotesque and the features of such humorous texts.

The conclusion of the book, “Mr. Gum and the emergent paradigm”, basically provides further strengthening of Cross’ arguments in the form of a detailed analysis of a contemporary text (Stanton’s *You’re a Bad Man, Mr. Gum!* from 2006) by using the same procedures she used in each respective chapter of the book. Julie Cross set out to reach a very ambitious aim in her book *Humour in Contemporary Junior Literature*. She wanted to show us that examining – the often neglected – humour in texts of children’s literature is of vital importance from the point of view of childhood studies as well as literary criticism. With her book, she definitely manages to convince the reader that humour does matter for children, especially from the point of view of their personal development and ability to successfully socialize. In order to make future systematic research in this area possible, Cross also provides a theoretical and procedural framework. I would recommend this book, without hesitation, to anyone who is interested in humour research in the context of children’s literature as well as childhood studies.

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References

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