

## TAKING FUNNY BOOKS SERIOUSLY

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Funny books have had a bit more press recently, mainly down to Michael Rosen coming up with the inspired idea of the Funny Prize. Thanks, Michael. Those of us who attempt to write them can crawl in from the comedy wilderness, which in our case is probably peppered with unexpected canyons, cactuses lifted straight from the Beano and camels doing hilarious pratfalls.

It's high time funny books were taken seriously. They are regularly overlooked in most of the major prizes. Short-listed, maybe. But do they ever win? Rarely. When the winner is announced, the hopeful smiles drop from the lips of those us in the comedy business. Some of us have been known to weep, (No? Just me, then.) Isn't it shallow to care so much, you ask? Yes, but we're all human and everyone needs the occasional pat on the back.

I've sometimes wondered about writing a properly serious book with miserable real life issues and a big fat Message. The sort of book that garners reviews saying things like "*Made me weep, rend my clothes and reconsider life as we know it. A classic.*" But I know I couldn't do it. I like funny. It's all I can do. It's what I want to read and what I want to write.

It all begins in childhood, doesn't it? As a child, you discover a funny book. You read it and you're hooked. I was a child in the fifties. The first book I remember laughing at was *Nicholas Thomas*, by Kitty Styles. I've still got it. It's about a naughty kitten whose tail was, I remember, "*curiously crooked with questions.*" Then came Anthony Buckeridge's *Jennings*, followed by the wonderful *Molesworth*. But *William* really did it for me. I

loved him with a passion. All boys, you notice, but so what? I didn't care. There was always Violet Elizabeth.

I devoured those books. They made me so, *so* happy. I laughed so hard I couldn't breathe. I read them at night, under the covers, stifling giggles. I liked comics too. I bought *Beano* and *Dandy* out of my pocket money and a penny chew to suck while I read them. Little Plum. The Bash Street kids. Denis the Menace. Fabulous.

I'm still the same. I watch loads of comedy on television. I love silly, off-the-wall stuff, like *Harry Hill* and *The Mighty Boosh*, and clever, witty stuff like *The Simpsons* and *Blackadder*. I love the coughing man in *The Fast Show*. He makes me laugh until I ache. My family have to bring me water.

I'm a sucker for prat falls and funny walks and Dawn French dancing. And I constantly search for funny books, because books are still best. Television is humour you can share, which is great, but a book is private, like a secret joke whispered into your ear. You can wander around with a book, snorting to yourself and eating toast. Or getting funny looks on the tube. I was thrilled to be asked to help judge the Funny Prize last year. Weeks of reading hundreds of funny books. What's not to like?

A sense of humour is very personal. Some people like dry, knowing humour. Some prefer, jokey, daft stuff. Kids often find things funny that adults don't. Small boys like anything with bums in.

Of course, some things are intrinsically funny. Sausages are funny. So are penguins and ducks. We can all agree about them. But people differ. For instance, I admit I enjoy people tripping up. But underpants leave me cold (unless they're woolly.) I don't like things to be too gross, because I can be surprisingly prim. A lot of small boys would disagree with me there. Fair enough, each to his own.

When I read, I want to feel like I'm friends with the author. I grin gleefully at a funny turn of phrase. An unexpected plot twist. A comic character with a strong line in repartee. An hilarious description, preferably of an accident.

I found all of those in *William*. It definitely started there. Richmal Crompton was a genius. She didn't write down to children. She used long, adult sounding words. She had a brilliant turn of phrase and her characters were, quite simply, perfect. I can hear their voices in my head. I can quote some of the lines. She brightened my childhood. I still want to be a member of the Outlaws.

I suppose I access that kid that still lives inside me when I write. Her name was Kathleen Ellis. Decades later she has a different name, but she's still me. I remember how it felt to be nine, helpless with giggles, lost in my own, joyful little world where cross words couldn't reach. That's another thing. Humour helps you deal with real life problems. There. I've ended on a serious note. Happy?