



The Consumption of Laughter in Everyday Life

—Kristine Dizon

Arnaldo, Monica. *Time for Bed's Story*. Kids, 2020. 32 pp. \$19.99 hc. ISBN 9781525302398.

Forsythe, Matthew. *Pokko and the Drum*. Simon and Schuster/ Wiseman, 2019. 64 pp. \$23.99 hc. ISBN 9781481480390.

Rex, Adam. *Why?* Illustrated by Claire Keane, Chronicle, 2019. 60 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9781452168630.

Yoshitake, Shinsuke. *The Boring Book*. Chronicle, 2019. 40 pp. \$17.99 hc. ISBN 9781452174563.

Laughter is powerful. We laugh after a joke. We laugh when we cry. We sometimes laugh at things we shouldn't. There are physical benefits to laughter: it helps decrease stress and fight diseases, and it releases endorphins that can even temporarily relieve pain ("Laughter"). We laugh as a result of various types of interactions: laughter is an expression generated through our interaction with objects and subjects around us, bringing psychological relief and escape from problems (Mayo Clinic Staff).

Laughter can be produced in everyday life—sometimes intentional, sometimes not. According to Plato, laughter is inspired by individuals laughing at earlier versions of themselves or at the misfortunes of others, suggesting the moral harmfulness of laughter (Destrée and Trivigno). "When we laugh, therefore, at our friends' ridiculous condition, logic declares we mix Pleasure with Envy, and blend, therefore, Pleasure and Pain" (Plato 63). While laughter is often associated with positive effects and its ability to communicate happiness, it can come at the expense of someone's well-being.

In the eighteenth century, Sigmund Freud suggested that laughter is a release of "nervous energy" that stems from "thorny social and ethnic issues" in an amusing way through a series of comedic punchlines that allow any inappropriate feelings of hostility to be released in the form of laughter (Sabato). Another theory of laughter is the theory of incongruity: the more unexpected, the funnier something is.

Children are active consumers. They consume objects in the form of stories, films, TV, video games, vlogs, and other media specifically designed for young people, as well as media messages not designed for them. The consumption of these objects depends on how they are acquired and used along with how they interact with it. Specific age groups shape the consumption of media: a ten-year-old child engages with objects in a different way than a three-year-old—especially if the object is supposed to produce laughter. The four picture books reviewed herein—Matthew Forsythe’s *Pokko and the Drum*, Monica Arnaldo’s *Time for Bed’s Story*, Adam Rex’s *Why?*, and Shinsuke Yoshitake’s *The Boring Book*—all incorporate laughter from different perspectives.

Pokko and the Drum illustrates how the juxtaposition of incompatible concepts, or objects that defy one’s understanding of reality, generate humour (Sabato). Forsythe tells the story of a little frog whose parents give her a drum as a present. The first lines set the tone for the entire story: “The biggest mistake Pokko’s parents ever made was giving her a drum. They had made mistakes before.” Despite giving Pokko perhaps inappropriate gifts in the past, including a slingshot, a llama, and a balloon, her parents believe that, out of all the presents, the drum was the biggest mistake. While the idea of a little frog playing a drum is unrealistic, the difficulties that parents experience when giving presents to their children is real, and this aspect of the book allows audiences to relate to the book’s characters.

While the drum they have given her appears to be harmless, it becomes a nuisance, as she really enjoys playing it. Her father encourages her to take her drum into the forest to play instead of in their home, but he advises her not to play too loudly because she does not want to draw attention to herself. Pokko agrees and decides to go to the forest so that she can play her drum. As Pokko walks into the forest, it was very quiet—almost too quiet. The dark colours Forsythe uses to illustrate the forest, and the emphasis on silence, creates a type of suspense and anticipation for the reader. While in the forest, Pokko begins to play her drum until she is joined by a raccoon playing a banjo, and before she knows it, a band of animals follows her: a raccoon, a rabbit, and then a wolf. Eventually, the whole forest of animals follows with their instruments, enjoying the music together.

The book is marketed as a story about art, persistence, and a frog family, and its use of humour is subtle; Forsythe’s colour images and witty narration would appeal not only to

children but adults too. It is funny how Pokko's parents have a tendency to get her presents that do not seem to be the most appropriate for a small frog: a real-life problem that readers can relate to when it comes to gift-giving. The images of Pokko inside a slingshot, sitting on the llama with her frog parents squished underneath, and floating away in the balloon not only illustrate the humour behind these "mistakes," but also emphasize Pokko's small size to the reader, which make it more humorous.

Despite the struggle Pokko has with her frog parents, she is really good at playing the drum, which is something that they need to accept. She was able to develop a musical following from different animals, demonstrating how music is a universal language and it creates community, even in an imagined world of animals. Pokko's love for music and her persistence to keep playing her drum adds a poignant element to the storyline, providing a wholesome element to the reader.

Pokko is unique in that she is character that is relatable to all ages. Even though the story begins with her father telling her to play her drum quietly and to not draw attention to herself, she does the complete opposite: you can say that she marches to the beat of her own drum. She leads the forest animals in a musical performance and does not put up with any bad behaviour, such as when the wolf eats the rabbit who was playing the trumpet.

Forsythe uses violence and the unexpected to produce humour when the wolf ate the rabbit. It initially seems like a random moment in the story, but after multiple reads, a powerful moment happens when Pokko says to the wolf, "No more eating band members or you're out of the band." While the wolf appears larger than Pokko and could this easily assert its dominance, the wolf apologizes for eating the rabbit. The wolf's response to Pokko was unexpected, as readers might expect the same fate for her. And while a reader might feel remorse for the rabbit, his sacrifice was needed to produce the humour of the wolf in his apologetic state when he is confronted by Pokko.

Forsythe engages the reader through images that can be appreciated independently of the text. The watercolour illustrations are impressive, and Forsythe's colours and details make the story aesthetically attractive. While Pokko's face remains expressionless in each image, almost as if Pokko is a comedian telling a series of dry jokes, her parents' facial expressions change.

As they begin losing sleep over Pokko's drum playing, Forsythe draws a small line under one of her father's eyes to show he is tired, contrasting Pokko's deadpan visage. This subtle visual cue communicates the father's struggle, almost to a comedic point, of hearing the drum around the house. Toward the end of the story, as Pokko plays music with the other animals in harmony, her parents are carried by other animals in the forest. Her father realizes Pokko is leading from the front and her mother believes that she is pretty good at the drum. The story ends with, "And no one could hear what he [Pokko's father] was saying, but if they could... they would have all agreed." The conclusion highlights the importance of not listening to the naysayers, even those closest to us. Even if readers were able to hear what the father had to say, they would continue to march to the beat of the protagonist, Pokko.

Monica Arnaldo's *Time for Bed's Story* is told from the point of view of an unusual narrator, a child's bed, who describes the typical complaints children have about bedtime. Similar to the first lines of Forsythe's story, the first lines of Arnaldo's set the tone for the reader: "Hello. Bed here. Yes, Bed. Bed has something to say." Not only is the narrator an inanimate object, but it addresses itself in the third person.

Special attention is given to some annoying sleeping habits: for instance, sleep kicking. The reader is shown a close-up of Bed's annoyed face as the child's feet are kicking in the air. Worse than sleep kicking is the habit of drooling while we sleep. Arnaldo's storytelling balances disgust with levity. While readers may find these particular habits annoying and gross, they are all habits that are relatable. The humour behind this story is that our narrator cannot do anything about these habits since it cannot directly communicate with the child.

Another annoying occurrence is when someone takes all the blankets from the bed, which leaves Bed out in the cold and unable to sleep. The details used to illustrate Bed's discomfort bring life to our narrator: its mouth is drawn, and eyebrows are furrowed. These illustrative details communicate not only the narrator's annoyance but also the humour of the situation since there is not a whole lot the narrator could do, since it is only a bed, but to share with the reader its grievances.

Bed describes how things are also not ideal during the daytime, as its owner jumps on, hides under, and plays games on it. As the child appears jumping on Bed, the narrator's

discomfort is illustrated with wavy lines of its mouth and lines underneath its eyes, details that brings life to an inanimate object and makes Bed more believable as a character.

Arnaldo's use of grotesque humour appears in her thoughtful illustrations. The narrator describes how the child leaves dirty shoes, half-eaten food, and dirty socks underneath it: the illustrations show ants taking comfort in the forgotten food. Looking closely, there is an ant floating on a piece of cereal in a bowl of milk, an ant sitting on a piece of candy as if it is a lounge chair, and an ant pushing a toy car. The humour behind this moment is in the level of detail Arnaldo provides to show the joy the ants have with all of these forgotten objects and in the fact that, despite these uncomfortable circumstances, our narrator is not able to communicate its disgust with the child's hygienic habits.

The humour behind this children's story appears in the narrator's helplessness and inability to do anything about the child's poor hygiene and aggressive treatment. While the narrator's is non-human, it appears to experience a number of complex emotions, just as humans do, adding humour to the story at its expense. We ultimately feel empathy for our narrator throughout its detailed account of its daily dealings with the child.

Anyone who has dealt with young children knows of their propensity for asking many questions. Adam Rex's *Why?* is a tale that focuses on the universal tendency of young children asking the question "Why?" Rex introduces the supervillain Doctor X-Ray, who crashes through a glass ceiling and threatens an innocent crowd of people in the mall. As the shoppers clear out, a small girl is brave enough to not run away and asks, "Why?," which she continues to ask throughout the story as Doctor X-Ray answers each time. With each question, the audience discovers more about why Doctor X-Ray invaded the mall. "Because... Because the world has been very unfair to me!"

Throughout the story, we see a transformation of the villain as he reveals his insecurities and vulnerability through the little girl's questioning. Toward the end of the story, as Doctor X-Ray disappears, the little girl's mother finds her again and as they walk out of the mall, she says, "Because..." The final image of the little girl shows her winking at the reader.

While Rex's story initially appears to be about overcoming the monster archetype, it turns into an introspective telling of a misunderstood individual seeking approval from those around

him. The reader gets the backstory on Doctor X-Ray: as a child, he had a yarn store that did not work out because people did not knit as much as they used to. Rex suggests that villains are not born villains but that they become so after facing difficult childhoods.

At this point of the story, Doctor X-Ray becomes more relatable to the reader, encouraging sympathy for his experiences in childhood. On a surface level, this picture book teaches young learners how to figure out questions to their own problems by asking “Why?” On a deeper level, Rex presents relatable problems that include an adult coping with failure and a lack of parental support and seeking approval. His father wanted him to be a real doctor because he was a doctor, and the reason why they were all doctors was because they were told to be. Even though the conflicts Rex presents to the reader are not funny, humour can be found in the book’s illustrations of the villain and the protagonist as they appear in different parts of the mall: the little girl often appears bored and indifferent to Doctor X-Ray’s narrative. Doctor X-Ray’s unexpected character development throughout the story is funny, especially his fascination with yarn, which funnily juxtaposes his villainy with one of the most harmless activities—knitting.

Shinsuke Yoshitake’s *The Boring Book* is a picture book that follows the story of a bored little boy. As the story progresses, the protagonist discovers there’s actually more to boredom than meets the eye: more questions, theories, and humour. Boredom is a common complaint among children and is the core of Yoshitake’s story. The first lines of the story, “I’m bored. So bored!” establish the theme of the story. There are several images of the little boy seated on a couch, staring into space, his toys sprawled out on the floor, and nothing on television. The little boy fidgets on the couch and then complains to his mother about his boredom.

Similar to Rex’s story, the universal question “Why?” crosses the little boy’s mind, which leads him to wonder about boredom. The little boy wonders if perhaps being bored has nothing to do with him. He wonders whether pill bugs, vending machines, a rock in the street, his teddy bear, a straw wrapper, an air conditioner, the shoes he never wears because they hurt his feet, the carrots he didn’t eat, the pencil, or a random component that fell off something get bored.

As the narrator is thinking about these things, he realizes that it is actually fun to think about boring things and wonders if the world can be divided into “fun” and “boring” things. The narrator describes a type of in-between time when he is not even thinking about anything at

all. There are also things that are neither fun nor boring, like peeling a hard-boiled egg, waking up earlier than usual, or even riding a bus. The little boy's curiosity leads him to discussions with his grandpa and father about what it was like to have fun. His father encourages him to consider that, no matter how bored he is, it is up to him to make things fun and that being bored makes fun experiences more exciting. The story ends with the little boy stating that he has heard that before, "So it's boring!"

Yoshitake's *The Boring Book* provides several thought-provoking questions on how we categorize and think about different activities. What do we consider fun? What do we consider boring? Or what do we call something when it is neither fun nor boring? How does the meaning of fun or boring change as we get older? Is there a prescribed behaviour to show when someone is having fun or when they are bored? Or what do adults do when they get bored? These questions are useful but could be outlined more clearly to highlight the issues of boredom, as the suggested age range is between ages five to eight.

This story contains very witty commentary. In particular, the moment when the little boy imagines the most boring amusement is very humorous. Slow rollercoasters, haunted houses that are not scary, and lukewarm drinks are the epitome of the most boring amusement park; these moments from the story are funny, as they are unexpected things that one would encounter at an amusement park. The story's progression illustrates the benefits of asking "Why?" being able to unfold the mysteries of boredom. The author encourages the reader to ask questions to activate our imaginations of how we all individually think about boredom.

Boredom is a relatable theme for both children and adults. Yoshitake uses vibrant colours in the illustrations to further engage the reader with the story. The narrative itself is at times difficult to follow, as the character's thoughts appear random, showing the challenge of an adult attempting to tell a story from the point of view of a child. While the illustrations promote visual literacy, important for young learners, the narrative is disjointed and at times difficult to follow and it does not read as a story for children.

Picture books allow readers to use their own imaginations in varying degrees to develop their ideas of what these stories mean to them. While a story may produce laughter from one reader, it may not for another if they did not understand the story. If the reader has not

had experience with an object or been in a similar situation, the story is less likely to produce laughter.

The relationship between the narrative and illustrations plays an important role in producing laughter in a meaningful way. It is not possible to force laughter in another person, as it would not be a natural response to the interaction between an individual and an object. *Pokko and the Drum* engages a topic both children and adults can relate to with a depth not found in many children's stories. Forsythe also teaches that art is important: children and adults should value art and its production, and through perseverance, we can encourage others to understand its value too. Pokko standing up to the wolf teaches us that no matter one's size, it takes bravery to defend oneself. The humour is found in Forsythe's narrative and his illustrations, which engage the reader visually.

The details put into the illustrations, along with their attractive colours, make stories like *Pokko and the Drum* humorous. The story is relatable in a poignant way, depicting how humans interact with inanimate objects and how they would respond if they were alive. In Monica Arnaldo's *Time for Bed's Story*, Bed's annoyance with the child is funny because the different scenarios Bed finds itself in are relatable to the reader. While telling the story from the Bed's point of view is humorous, it also provides an empathetic description of its difficulties with the child. Arnaldo created a voice for an inanimate object in a convincing way that encourages readers to wonder what objects that surround us think about how we interact with them.

These four stories use humorous situations in daily life to inspire laughter: inappropriate presents, universal complaints about bedtime and boredom, and the insatiable question "Why?" Relatability plays a strong role in inspiring laughter and engaging a larger audience of young readers and adults. While the interaction between the consumer and inanimate object are unilateral, these picture books were written to be consumed by young audiences but, incidentally, can be consumed by adults too. At some point in their lives, children and adults have experience with the themes that make these four stories humorous in their unique way. Readers interactions with these stories will produce a variety of responses depending on how they understand these different narratives.

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