

editor's comments

Eliminating The Evidence

A few weeks ago, my son Asa, who is nine, told his seven-year-old sister Alice a new poem that he had learned from his friend Brent. It went like this:

Milk, milk, lemonade,
Push the button
And fudge is made.

They both giggled gleefully, and I had to listen to them recite these words to each other about once every five minutes for the next week or so, until I finally told them that if I ever heard them say that stupid poem again I would staple a rope into their necks, attach them to the ceiling, and throw lemonade and fudge at them. I do, of course, like to encourage literary involvement in my children, but surely even appreciation of poetry has its limits.

And anyway, it wasn't just the words they were enjoying. It was that they said them while pointing to various parts of their bodies: on "milk, milk" to their nipples, on "lemonade" to their crotches, on "button" to their navels, and on "fudge" to their anuses. Their pleasure in this rhyme was just one example, of hundreds I have mercifully chosen not to record here, of my offspring's deep and apparently abiding delight in bathroom humor. Someday, I hope, they will no longer find elimination funny—at least not so funny that they have to repeat every joke about it ten thousand times, including a few thousand at the dinner table. But it sure ain't happened yet.

But then, come to think of it, elimination is funny—an inherently comical act; like sex and death, it punctures our pretensions by forcing us, every time we do it, to remember that we are after all not much different from dogs or ladybugs. People who can't find humor in that humbling truth, who would rather not think of it, who find lemonade and fudge disgusting, are merely denying their own participation in the human condition; indeed, a friend of mine who is a devout Christian once told me that people didn't truly understand the implications of the incarnation, and therefore, had no real faith, unless they could accept the idea of Jesus sitting on a toilet. It is essentially human to have to sit on a toilet every now and then.

There are, of course, a lot of people who can't accept ideas like that—people like Jonathan Swift's Strephon, who so foolishly idealizes the divine Celia that the evidence of body odors and elimination provided by his clandestine visit to her dressing room destroys his love for her and for all women; as Swift tells us in a famous couplet, Strephon leaves behind the perspiration-laden towels and filled commodes of Celia's room

Repeating in his amorous fits
"Celia! Celia! Celia sh—!"

I suspect that a disproportionately large number of Strephons are attracted to children's literature, both as writers and as critics of it. As I thought about my children's vast pleasure in their rhyme, it occurred to me that it was a sort of pleasure surprisingly little evoked in writing for children, and that this reticence might be exactly what attracts many adult specialists to it. Even though authors often claim to write what most will please children, and even though any observer of children will tell you that the Nodelman children's fascination with bodily functions is anything but unusual or perverse, the children in children's books rarely seem to have to go to the toilet, rarely think about having to go to the toilet, and most of all, rarely make jokes about having to go to the toilet.

There are exceptions. Emma, the main character in Louise Fitzhugh's *Nobody's Family Is Going to Change*, marches off to the bathroom after a fight with her younger brother, whom she considers to be vain:

She sat on the john with a thud. . . . She looked across to the mirror on the door, at the vision of herself on the john. "Blech," she said loudly.

Before she flushed, she examined her productions with earnest horror. "I guess his have ribbons on them," she said, as she flushed enthusiastically. She laughed as she washed her hands. (34)

The children who adopt a puppy in Maurice Sendak's *Some Swell Pup* say "Disgusting!" and "I don't believe it!" when their pet poops on the floor, and when they ask the wise dog wrapped in a sheet who comes to tell them all about dog-parenting, "How about wetting? Call that normal?" he looks at the wet spot on his garment and says "Whoops! Heh-Heh—We'll have to do something about that!" *Some Swell Pup* contains what may well be the first full frontal depiction of excrement in a children's picture book; and it continues to indulge in bathroom humor in a later picture in which the rambunctious pup appears trailing a roll of toilet paper. Not surprisingly, the introduction of an animal into the house disrupts the usual comforting order by bringing out into the open evidence of animal functions that many of us prefer to hide.

But even though these books depict elimination, the characters universally express disgust about it. A quick survey of the children's books I know turned up very few examples of references to eliminatory functions that express the delight in vulgarity that my own children share with so many others. When the child in Dennis

Lee's *The Ordinary Bath* gets angry at his mother for not pouring enough water and says "rude things," Jon McKee depicts the rude things as a worm, a spider, a smelly sock—and what is clearly a pile of excrement. And in a poem in *Dirty Beasts* about a flying cow who is insulted by a "horrid man" who calls her silly, Roald Dahl tells us this:

She dived, and using all her power
She got to sixty miles an hour.
"Bombs gone!" she cried. "Take that!" she said.
And dropped a cowpat on his head.

Most tellingly, though, the most honest depiction of childhood delight in the humor of elimination I could find is in a book I hadn't read, but that my older son Joshua lent to me when I told him I was working on this editorial. Josh had received David Budbill's *Bones on Black Spruce Mountain* as a birthday present from a classmate; I hadn't bothered reading it because it looked like the typical easy-to-read schlock that paperbacks series offer so much of these days. And it is, except for a scene in which Seth and his friend Daniel, who has lived in a number of foster homes, prepare for sleep as they camp out in the mountains:

Both boys stepped around behind the lean-to to urinate before turning in.
"You know," Daniel said, "When I was a little kid I could pee about ten times this far. I remember, years ago, when I lived with one of my other families, I used to go out on the back porch at night and piss all over her roses. She never could figure out why they didn't do too good."

Seth was startled. It was the first time Daniel had ever mentioned anything about his past. (44)

It is accurate of reality but surprising in children's fiction that Seth should be startled by the reminiscence rather than by its subject.

For most of the time, the characters in children's books do not eliminate at all—at least not outside the confines of the many books which are specifically designed to teach toilet training. The children of children's literature do not eliminate at home, where it might seem inevitable and natural, and they do not eliminate on voyages to outer space or on adventures in the wild where the ways in which they manage to do so might be a matter of some interest. They do not eliminate in fantasies where it might ground the magic in a believable reality, and they do not often eliminate even in realistic novels where they nevertheless worry about masturbating and menstruation and getting laid.

Such reticence has not always been the case with the literature available to children. In the light of the topic of this issue, for instance, it's interesting that in the literature for children that emerged from the oral traditions of folklore, it was once possible to laugh about elimination, even though versions intended for modern children have eliminated the evidence. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, for instance, Iona and Peter Opie tell us that the rhyme that now goes

Little Robin Redbreast
Sat upon a rail;

Niddle noddle went his head,
Wiggle waggle went his tail (371-2)

had a different last line when it appeared in *Tom Thumb's Pretty Song Book* in the seventeen forties: "And Poop went his hole." In her discussion of her work with folk tales in this issue of the *Quarterly*, Gail E. Haley tells how references to Jack defecating on the giant's stairs to make them slippery and to Little Red Riding Hood escaping from the wolf by saying that she has to go outside to relieve herself have been eliminated from modern children's versions of these stories, and adds, "It's not just that some of these incidents would be offensive to some children and parents, but that some of them would not be understood by the modern child." I don't doubt that many parents would find these incidents offensive; but I do wonder if they would be joined in their indignation by many children, who surely would not be prevented by their knowledge of modern indoor plumbing from figuring out what Jack or Little Red had in mind—and who, if they are still flexible enough to accept disruptions of the usual reticence they will have learned to expect of children's literature, would enjoy it immensely.

A few months ago, I read my children some of the legends of Nanabozho (sometimes Nanabush or Nanabushu), the trickster-hero-god-devil of the Ojibwa who were the inhabitants of the country near my home in Winnipeg before the Europeans arrived. We all found these stories rather flat and un-involving; so I decided to explore some older and more authentic versions to see if the lack of interest was inherent in the tales, or if it had emerged as a result of their being adapted for children of a different culture. The story I investigated was one in Dorothy Reid's *Tales of Nanabozho*, intended for children, about how Nanabozho cleverly ties together a bunch of geese he wants to capture, until they all take off together and he ends up being pulled through the air by them; as a result, the geese flew in a V, and "wild geese have been flying that way ever since" (21). Interestingly, I couldn't find this story in the sources I consulted; although I don't doubt it's authentic, it obviously wasn't quite as central to the meaning of Nanabozho as another story I found, in William Jones's *Ojibwa Texts*, called "Nanabush Flies with the Geese." In this story, the geese teach Nanabushu to fly so that he can find rice more successfully, but warn him that he is not to look down when he is over a hostile village. He does look down, of course, and he falls into the village. "Thereupon," as Jones's gentlemanly and elegant translation says,

was he thoroughly bound with cords. "Come on, let us ease ourselves upon him!" they said. Whereupon truly was he then eased upon, by every one there in the town was he eased upon. In course of time he became engulfed so deep in the dung that he had to purse his lips. (131)

Like all slapstick humor, this is subversive: Nanabushu is a superhuman being who gets punished appropriately for his pretensions. And that is not the only pretension deflated here; after Nanabushu escapes, he bathes in a lake:

While looking at the water, he saw then the dung floating thereon. When he came out of the water this then he said; "The name which the people my uncles shall call it—'ah, filthy water!' such shall be the name of the lake."

The Ojibway word that Nanabushu actually gives for "filthy water" is "Winnipeg." So much for the tourist bureau's polite contention that my city's name means "muddy" water.

Since this story had obvious educational merit—it offered new insight into the history of their native city—I decided to tell it to my children. As I had expected, they loved it, just as much as they had been politely bored by the other story of Nanabozho and the geese. They made me tell it to their friends, who also loved it. I suspect these children would be equally delighted by the story of Jack defecating on the stairs that Haley refers to, and that most children would probably prefer these versions to the laundered ones we are willing to provide for them.

But children are as unlikely to have access to these impolite versions as they are to find the story of Nanabushu's besmirching in a book published for children. Haley is right to suggest that parents would not be delighted by these stories. They would be unsellable as children's books—and not, I believe, because parents (or teachers or librarians or editors or writers) are themselves too sophisticated to emit a few giggles about eliminatory functions now and then. Indeed, many adults do laugh about poop and pee, and even accept children laughing about poop and pee; what they do not accept is the presence of such laughter within the narrow confines of children's literature. The relative silence of children's literature about such subjects is most significant simply because it reveals the often huge gulf between childhood as depicted in children's literature and the lives and interests of real children.

In a clear case of serendipity, I happened to be reading Alison Lurie's novel *Foreign Affairs* at the same time as Asa and Alice were giggling about fudge and lemonade. One of its main characters is Vinnie Miner, a specialist in children's literature who hangs around schoolyard and collects rhymes, one of which is

Milk, milk, lemonade
Around the corner fudge is made. (167)

Apparently, Vinnie "has even (without the accompanying gestures to parts of the body, of course) used this verse in her lectures as an example of folk metaphor, demonstrating the young child's undifferentiated pre-moral pleasure in both food and bodily products" (167).

But why without the accompanying gestures? Because Alison Lurie knows her children's literature specialists; Vinnie finds such children's folklore disgusting, and at this point in the novel, she is worrying about whether or not to pretend she has not heard the vulgar rhymes she has just collected from a British schoolgirl, rhymes which might destroy her tidy and comforting thesis that British children are less vulgar than American ones (like many professors of literature, Vinnie is a determined Anglophile who prefers British convention to American breeziness). Vinnie had herself had an unusually happy childhood, or at least, loved everything that she chooses

to remember about it, and hated the realization in adolescence that she would have to give it up. "As it turned out, though," Lurie tells us,

Vinnie didn't have to relinquish childhood forever. No one really has to, she believes, and often declares. The message of all her lectures and books and articles—sometimes implicit, more often implied—is that we must, as she puts it, value and preserve childhood: we must "cherish the child within us." This isn't of course an original theme, but one of the basic doctrines of her profession. (160)

The childhood Vinnie and her profession values and preserves has little poop and pee in it; elimination has been eliminated, all evidence of animality and mutability has been eliminated, in order to satisfy an adult nostalgia for a supposed time of freedom from pain and limitation, a time of purity and innocence that never was.

In a sane world, I believe, we would take seriously our proclaimed faith that children's literature should offer children what children do most enjoy, and our intuition that folk tales appeal to children because children share patterns of thought with orally oriented cultures, the so-called "primitive" civilizations that were sophisticated enough to produce tales as wise as the stories of Jack or Nanabushu. The real child within us is wise enough to laugh at elimination and subvert the silly idealism that likes to ignore it; in a sane world, instead of laundering Jack tales and Nanabushu tales to suit our narrow prejudices about what we think childhood ought to be, we would honestly tell children the stories of defecation that are likely to delight them.

In the less sane world we are actually stuck with, we give children mildly amusing stories about why geese fly in a V instead of deeply humorous stories about how Nanabozho got eased upon. The irony, of course, is that young readers often like to joke about matters like being eased upon exactly *because* adults find such matters distasteful. It's no accident that the examples Gail Haley offers both make the products of a child's elimination instrumental in the defeat of figures of power and authority—no accident that the cowpat in Dahl's poem falls on the head of a narrow-minded boob or that the pee in Budbill's novels blights the roses of an unsympathetic authority figure. The indulgence by children in that which adults find distasteful is a subversive act, a necessary and profoundly wise defiance of those who wield power over them and who so often use it to encourage a distorted and incomplete view of reality.

Finally, then, I am glad that Asa and Alice find fudge and lemonade so funny, and that they feel free to tell me about it. But I can't help wishing for a world in which such subjects were too acceptable to be considered either subversive or funny—a world in which I would not have to be surprised and disturbed by the intense and intensely childish glee I find myself feeling as I think about all the upright people out there that I am going to annoy with this editorial.

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Caroline C. Hunt teaches in the English Department at The College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

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Perry Nodelman