

The FIVE OWLS

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A publication for readers personally and professionally involved in children's literature

The Enduring Joys of Children's Poetry

by Lucy Rollin

The man said,
after inventing poetry,
"WOW!"
and did a full somersault.

—William J. Harris

I recently asked the students in my children's literature course at Clemson University to bring to class a poem they liked. The variety of poems they brought was a revelation. (Mentally, I did a "full somersault.") They liked "Little Orphant Annie," "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod," poems by Frost and Dickinson, religious and inspirational poems, humorous and serious poems about pets and family. They liked poems their grandmothers had recited for them and poems they kept on their walls in their dorm rooms. They said some poems made them feel thoughtful, others made them laugh; they were easy to remember. The poems were not all "children's poems" in the usual sense of the term, but most were poems these students had recalled and loved since childhood. To me, these poems and the students' responses to them served as a fresh reminder of the enduring riches of children's poetry.

For almost three centuries, dominated by the Puritan tradition, poetry written for children was written in the admonishing voice of a parent—a loving parent, but one dispensing lessons nonetheless. Even a bedtime prayer expressed Puritan ideas about death as a constant presence in life: "Now I lay me down to sleep, / I pray the Lord my Soul to keep. / If I should die before I wake, / I pray the Lord my Soul to take." Poets like Isaac Watts and John Newbery continued the tradition throughout the eighteenth century. Rhyme made the lessons pleasant; rhythm made them memorable. In the early nineteenth century, Jane and Ann Taylor were the most popular poets for children, softening their lessons with an appreciation of nature. Their best-known poem "The Star" appeared in 1806 and has become part of the great canon of Mother Goose rhymes:

Twinkle, twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.

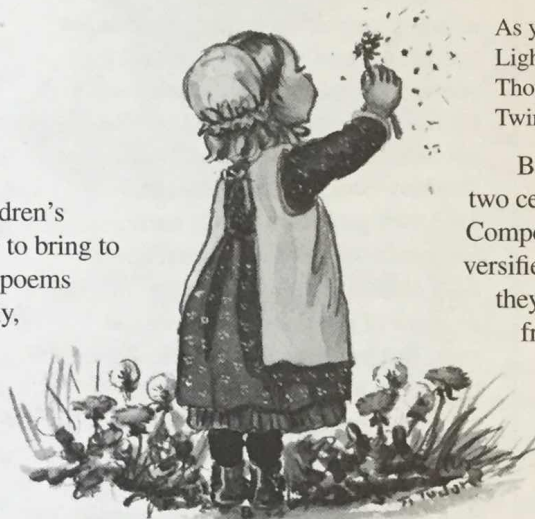


Illustration by Tasha Tudor from *A Child's Garden of Verses* (Simon & Schuster, 1981)

As your bright and tiny spark
Lights the traveller in the dark—
Though I know not what you are,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star!

But *real* nursery rhymes were already two centuries old before this one appeared. Composed by a host of anonymous versifiers with sly, bizarre senses of humor, they had no redeeming moral value at all, from the viewpoint of the Puritans, but slipped in all unbidden among the moral and instructional verse because children and adults alike enjoyed their ribald humor and bouncing rhythms. I suspect they may have been, during Puritan times at any rate, a private, rather guilty pleasure, like children's bawdy school-yard chants today:

Rub-a-dub-dub,
Three men in a tub,
And how do you think they got there?
The butcher, the baker,
The candle-stick maker,
They all jumped out of a rotten potato,
'Twas enough to make a man stare.

But poetry written deliberately for children has evolved, as critic Morag Styles says, from the garden to the street. The "garden" tradition of Watts and the Taylors—poetry celebrating the freshness of nature and the mysteries of childhood in language children themselves could grasp—flowered fully in Robert Louis Stevenson's classic volume *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885). Stevenson's remarkable sensitivity to the child's experience of the world, along with his skill at rhythm and rhyme, finally liberated children's poetry from the need to be moral. No other poet of yesterday or today captures so well a child's absorption in play for its own sake:

We built a ship upon the stairs
All made of the back-bedroom chairs,
And filled it full of sofa-pillows
To go a-sailing on the billows.

The Original Interactive Multimedia Game

Edward Lear's Literary Nonsense

by Michael Heyman

Quick—how many runcible spoons do you have in your store of cutlery? When was the last time you felt unequivocally ombliferous? Ever since the nineteenth century, children and adults around the world have been creating their own meanings for the words “runcible” and “ombliferous,” and, though “runcible” unfortunately and inexplicably has acquired a dictionary definition, we still have no definitive answers regarding their appearance in the children's nonsense poetry of Edward Lear (1812–1888). Nor *should* there be any answers.

The power and enjoyment of literary nonsense lies in the search for answers that are almost but never quite there. Edward Lear's “The Owl and the Pussycat” (1871) offers to the child and the adult the mysterious idea of the newlywed fowl and feline eating “mince, and slices of quince” with a “runcible spoon.” Lear refuses to define this item, though in later verses it pops up now and again, each time with slightly different implications. Likewise, in *A Book of Nonsense* (1846), one of Lear's “nonsenses” (or “limericks,” as we call them today), portrays the enigmatic Young Person of Crete:

There was a Young Person of Crete,
Whose toilette was far from complete;
She dressed in a sack, spickle-speckled with black,
That ombliferous person of Crete.

This young person's sly smile coupled with her wild hair and unusual vestments help the audience divine the word's definition—indeed the whole poem centers around this mysterious adjective—yet this word, unless it is also hijacked by Daniel Webster, will always elicit differing creative responses. Children have delightfully pondered over Edward Lear's inscrutable verse/illustration creations for over one hundred fifty years, and their continuing value to today's children and adults stems from their unique nature: Lear was perhaps the first artist to create fully *interactive*, multimedia children's entertainment. The nature of literary nonsense itself creates another level of interactivity within a text, one which is rare among children's literature of any time period. In his expansive corpus of work, Lear also combined illustrations, text, and even music in ways which had never quite been seen before, and the result is a genre, predominantly in the form of poetry, that not only entertains with its wild characters and events, carries its own set of sometimes subversive, yet always liberating values, but also stretches the imaginations of its audience, creating a dialogue between reader and text that surpasses most other kinds of writing, whether for children or adults.

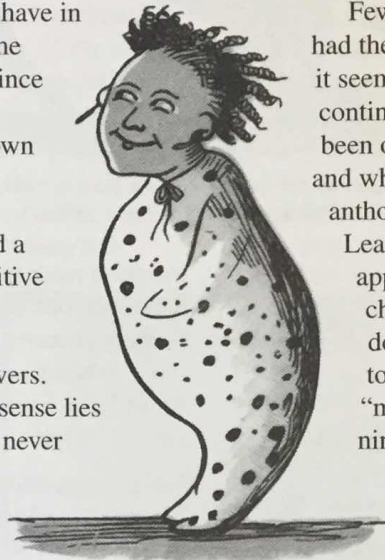


Illustration by Edward Lear
from *A Book of Nonsense* (A Studio
Book/Viking Press, 1980)

Few nineteenth-century children's writers have had the continued success of Edward Lear. Indeed, it seems somewhat redundant to argue for the continued relevance of a writer who has rarely been out of print in the last one hundred fifty years and who even today appears in numerous editions, anthologies, and even computerized versions.

Lear's volumes of nonsense poetry and prose appeared from 1846 to the 1870s, leading children's literature away from a market dominated by more didactic models and towards what we usually recognize today as “modern.” Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, he has been hailed as the father of children's literary nonsense;

prominent figures of his day and beyond, such as Alfred Tennyson, G.K.

Chesterton, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and T.S. Eliot, among others, recognized his real originality and contribution to literature. In 1886, John Ruskin even put Lear's *A Book of*

Nonsense at the top of his favorite one hundred books, a gesture which deeply moved Lear in his old age.

His *A Book of Nonsense* was revolutionary, not because it was the genre of literary nonsense—that had been around since the seventeenth century—but because it was literary nonsense for *children*. The genre, which had hitherto been an adult tradition rooted in obscure academic parody and topical issues, was suddenly reinvented for the nursery. This new genre feeds off of aspects of the *child's* world, such as other, usually more “serious” children's literature, nursery rhymes, behavioral norms, and gender stereotypes, twisting them for its own mischievous purposes. Lear's nonsense manifests in many forms, including limerick, alphabet, narrative in verse and prose, absurd cookery and botany, and music. And though nonsense has characteristics which distinguish it from poetry, Aldous Huxley called Lear a “genuine poet” and his limericks, which are far more sophisticated than they might first appear, have been dubbed by Wim Tigges the “sonnet of nonsense.” Lear's verse is poetry diverging from its normal course; it is *nonsense* poetry, and, as we shall see, it stresses a different level of creative interactivity in reading.

Children today are surrounded by so-called “interactive” entertainment, most notably in the form of computer games, but also in books. The child is asked to click on a figure, push a button, or pull a tab, and some kind of response is given, be it an animal noise or a form of animation. Such interactivity is usually on the basic level of point and click; there is little meaningful interaction. Likewise, although children's fantasy books like Sendak's

Where the Wild Things Are (Harper & Row, 1963) encourage the child to imagine the fantasy world, such creativity is only on the level of creating an end product, i.e. the author's fantasy world, with embellishments and extrapolations by the child. Nonsense, on the other hand, stresses a level of the creative process beyond (or

before) fantasy, a level that begins with language and logic puzzles. In nonsense, only after the audience (child and adult) has dealt with such puzzles can they proceed to the more common, though equally important, creative process of fabricating the "nonsense" world. Of course, in some ways, all language presents puzzles to the audience that they must creatively solve. Nonsense texts, however, differ from normal language in that they exaggerate such problems, forcing the reader into more impossible corners of language and logic. That is, in normal texts, the audience usually *can* make sense of things, while in nonsense, the audience is provoked into *trying* to find such meaning, even though, in the end, it does not exist.

The most widely recognized aspect of nonsense literature is its linguistic oddity. Lear's poems are full of misappropriations, neologisms, and even the occasional (and usually painful) pun. For example, take the Old Man with a beard, "Who sat on a horse when he reared; / But they said, 'Never mind! You will fall off behind, / You propitious Old Man with a beard!'" In this limerick, we come across the misappropriated word "propitious" in the last line, which gives the reader an interesting dilemma. A child reader (or listener) would probably not know the meaning of this word and would therefore take it as a neologism, similar to Lear's *real* neologisms like "scroobious," "runcible," and "borascible." Because this final adjective, as in many of Lear's limericks, seems to hold the key to the "meaning" of the verse, the reader must try to decipher it, which, in cases like this, probably means taking all the evidence in the verse and illustration and coming up with an educated guess. Ask a child what a "bong-tree" or a "runcible spoon" is, and you will probably get an amusing answer! Children are "naturals" at deciphering neologism, for this is a crucial part of language learning, and they will usually arrive at their own unique understanding of the word. Of course, the adult who reads this (and who hopefully knows the meaning of "propitious") has a slightly different task. He or she must reconcile the actual meaning of the word with its misappropriation, trying at least to make some kind of sense. Of course, neither the child nor the adult can arrive at a definitive answer, yet the value of this endeavor is that it exercises the mind creatively, stretching it to try to make sense. We must give up in the end, but not after having had

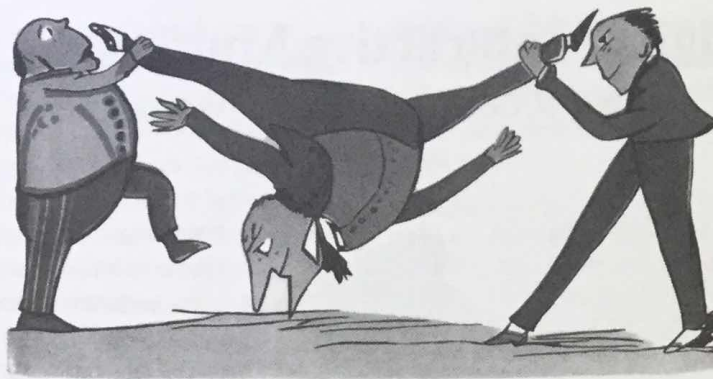


Illustration by Edward Lear from *A Book of Nonsense*
(A Studio Book/Viking Press, 1980)

fun with the "game" of nonsense. Only after this linguistic play can the reader move on to the process of creating the fantasy world—however contradictory it is because of the nonsense. A child's creativity is tapped not only with language, but also with logic. In the topsy-turvy world of nonsense, tea is made from water and stones,

inserting mice into gruel makes it more "nice," and carrying a duck on one's tail brings luck. The nonsense world blithely saunters through such oddities of logic, yet we as rational beings must try to make sense of them before going on with the narrative at hand. Take the following limerick as an example:

There was an Old Man of the West,
Who never could get any rest;
So they set him to spin, on his nose and his chin,
Which cured that Old Man of the West.

The "cure" is ridiculous by its very nature and also for its result, yet the nonsense world implies that such a cure is a result of natural cause and effect—as if to say, of *course* such spinning cures the Old Man. Ask the child how this works, and he or she will probably try to make the connection, and indeed, the nonsense world usually supplies *some* basis for it. In this case, we can see the logic of spinning wildly on one's face, becoming (understandably) tired, and perhaps collapsing in exhaustion, which delivers the desired rest. There is a shred of logic to the whole endeavor, however absurd—enough logic to get the mind thinking, if not enough, in the end, to arrive at a conclusive logical link. Once again, nonsense creates a game that calls for interaction to achieve its effect.

I have, for the most part, left out what never should be omitted—Lear's illustrations. These deceptively simple, yet sophisticated pictorial embellishments are crucial to Lear's work, making it perhaps the first fully integrated and interactive multimedia children's entertainment. Before

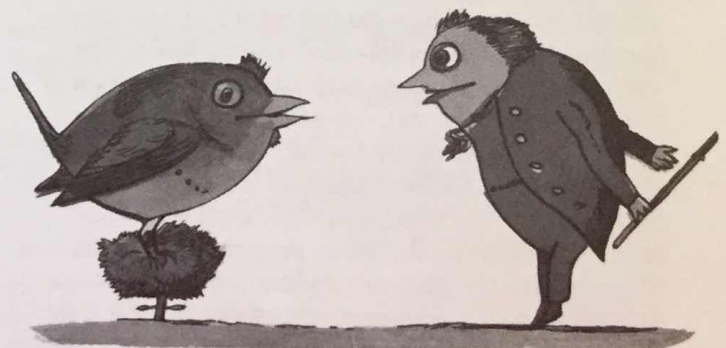


Illustration by Edward Lear from *A Book of Nonsense*
(A Studio Book/Viking Press, 1980)

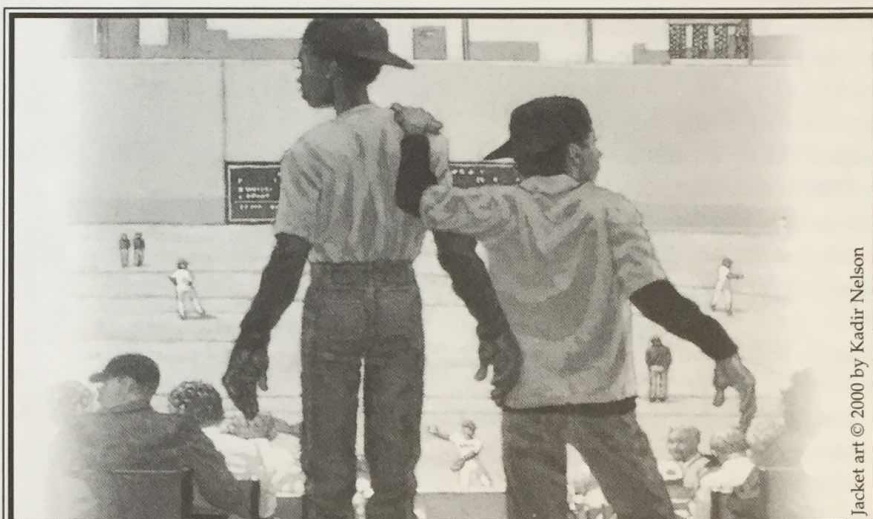
him, only William Blake, in his *Songs of Innocence* (1789) wove together picture and text so integrally. Indeed, Lear's humor often revolves around the discrepancy between picture and poem, or at the very least, the picture may add his particular joyful touch to the piece. In the above example of the "Old Man of the West," the illustration shows him to have an unusually pointed nose and chin, which, to some extent, mitigates the absurdity of the action if nothing else. Such touches create further interactivity: the audience must join picture to poem and try to make sense of it all. Rather than clarifying some idea, as illustration usually does, Lear's illustration (especially for the limericks) often adds to the ambiguity or creates it, increasing the nonsensical effect and perpetuating the mystery. The audience's mind is once again called into action, actively trying to make the illustration make "sense" in some way with the text. Sometimes this works, often the effort is futile—but the fun is found in the effort itself, regardless of the outcome.

Not all of Lear's illustrations, however, have this dynamic, but most contain an irrepressible vitality. His characters typically pose on tiptoe, arms flailing, practically flying off the page. They smile defiantly in the face of oppression, be it in the form of society's censorious conformers or even their own "natural" limitations. Of course, if parents want their children to grow up unquestioningly conforming to the dictates of a repressive society, then they should create a small bonfire with Lear's work and thank the stars that they and their children escaped such a brutish fate. Other readers of nonsense should look closely at Lear's work to find the albeit somewhat subversive pedagogic value and underlying themes, made all the more powerful because of the levels of interactivity required to "navigate" though the text. Lear's work upholds the sanctity of the individual and expresses contempt for overbearing social convention and assumed "intrinsic" limitation.

Witness "The Jumblies" (1871), for instance: though they are told by "Them" that "You'll all be drowned!" if they go to sea in a sieve, they "don't care a button!" for such advice. In spite of these nay-sayers, the Jumblies cast off, successfully deal with the inherent problems of their mode of transport, and find adventures and treasures that

none of the land-dwellers will ever know. Exotic bottles of "Ring-Bo-Ree," after all, are only to be found over the far "Western Sea."

The Table and Chair, in the eponymous poem (1871), break what they think are "intrinsic," natural limitations. When the Table recommends that the pair go for a walk, the Chair says, "'Now you *know* we are not able! / How foolishly you talk, / When you know we cannot walk!'" The table is unperturbed, and they do the impossible with a leap of faith: they take a walk. After the walk, in which they get lost but are shown back home by "a Ducky-quack, / And a Beetle, and a Mouse," they even manage to *dance* "upon their heads." They may never have reached the castle, their destination, but because they questioned their




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limitations and made the effort to go beyond them, they are amply rewarded.

The limericks also provide mischievous instruction. Of course, we may not want children learning to knock people down with pokers, cook their husbands in broth, or break all the jugs within twenty miles of their homes, but these are part of the slapstick fantasy beneath which lie more significant undercurrents. More than the longer verse, the limericks present eccentric individuals, defiantly adhering to their principles, no matter how quirky or how much "They," the disapproving public, heap scorn on them. These individuals are told to "be still," and then run away forever; they are told not to "encourage" a raven by dancing with it. They blissfully go about their odd lives, living in jars, teapots, and the tops of trees; they teach ducks to dance and owls to drink tea; they kick and scream, say "Fil-jumble, fil-jumble," or remain mysteriously silent; they have heads shaped like boxes and bodies like fish and birds; they boil eggs in their shoes and make tea in their hats. They do all of this—with confidence, joy, and utter disregard for those who would limit or censor them. In the face of constant struggle for individual expression, they glide by on tiptoe.

Lear's nonsense, then, provides a child both an escape and a safe return. It allows children a break from their relentless task of learning their own language and the world's logical "rules"—but at the same time exercises them with creative linguistic and logical play. It breaks all behavioral rules, making fun of the strict socialization they encounter every time their parent or schoolmate says "no"—yet at the same time encourages them to be confident, free-thinking individuals. While the interactivity of nonsense is similar for most of Lear's work, interesting themes and quirky characters populate his prose with great variety. Throughout Lear's many nonsense pieces, from his alphabets to the limericks to longer mock-travel literature, you will find far more than I have been able to give in this small space. It is indeed hard to find contemporary children's literature of such breadth that exercises the mind of both child and adult like Lear's nonsense. His work has made children's literature what it is today, and his influence can still be seen directly in other children's and adult

writers and illustrators, from Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein to James Thurber and James Joyce. A landscape painter by trade, Lear nevertheless took great pride in his nonsense; he knew that he was creating something unique, and he would perhaps not be surprised that his work is still as amusing and "edifying," to use his partly facetious word, as it was when he wrote it.

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