



An Analysis of Humorous Devices in Picturebooks: A Pictorial Article

— Elys Dolan

Keywords: *humour; pictorial; picture books: children's illustration*

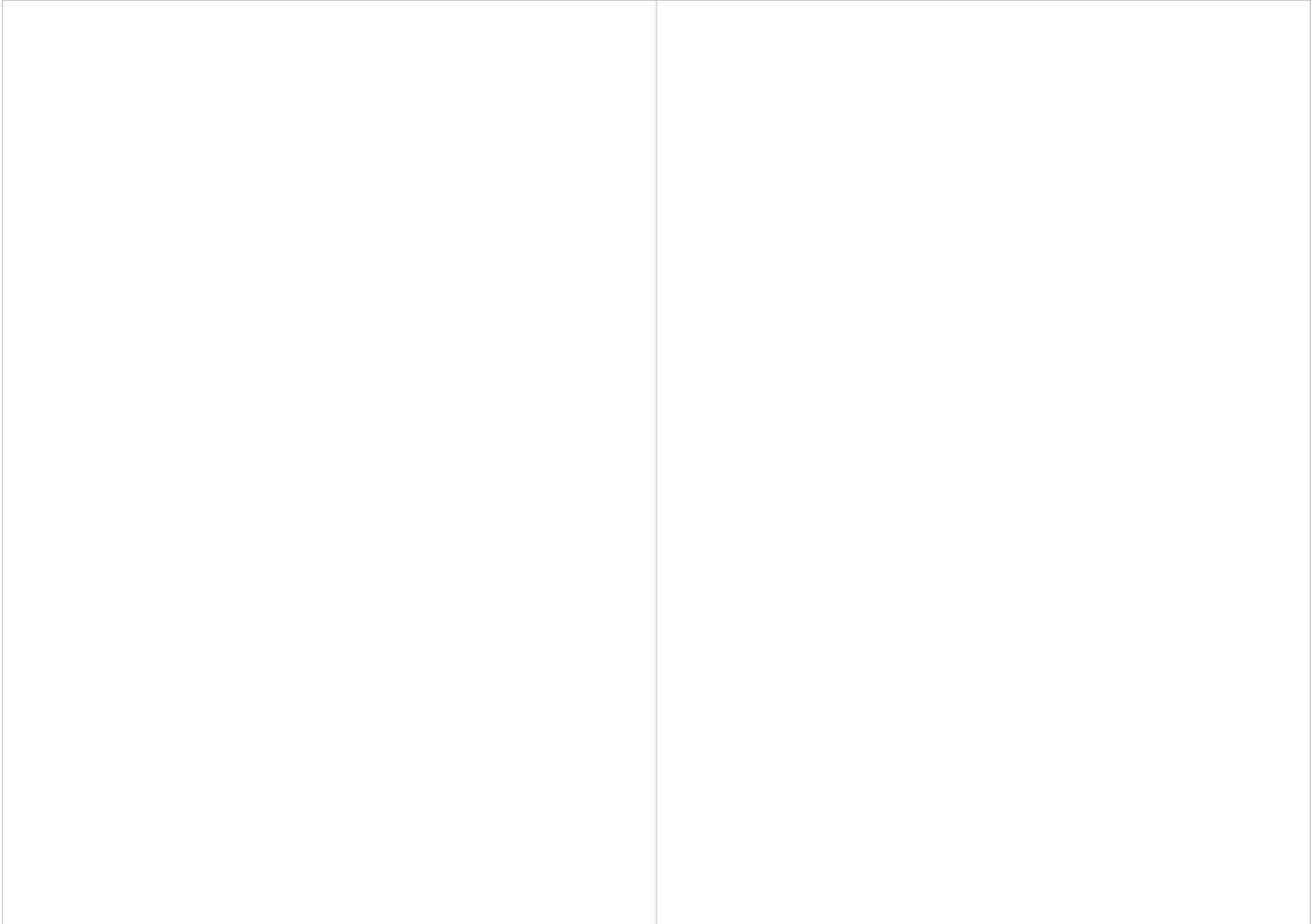
The purpose of this pictorial article is to demonstrate types of humour found in picturebooks and how the characteristics of the picturebook are deployed in their execution.

There are a great variety of definitions concerning what a picturebook is, but in the context of this article, Barbara Bader's definition is most applicable. Bader describes the picturebook "[a]s an art form [that] hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page" (1).

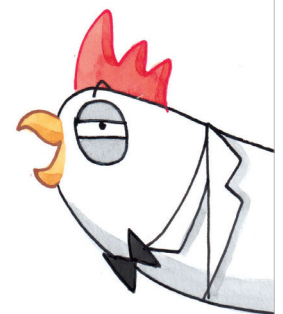
Demonstrating types of humour found in picturebooks, as opposed to purely analyzing existing instances of such humour, allows the reader the opportunity to experience comedic amusement. Therefore, this article is written and illustrated in the manner of a picturebook, using the conventions of the form, such as characters, setting, and word-image interplay. It is imperative that this article should be read as a picturebook would, with the reader considering both words and pictures together simultaneously and extracting meaning from their experience of the two working together.

To deliver this effect in the most compelling manner, this article is intended to be read in the form of a book, with two facing pages joined by a spine. Due to the need to reproduce this article in the two different formats required by both the print and digital versions of this journal, it has not been possible to display it in that manner. Therefore, one single page in this journal presents two facing pages of the article.

Please continue to turn the pages and wait for your lecturer to arrive.

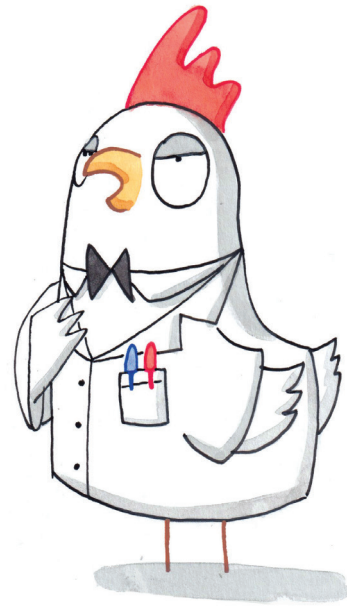


Ah! There you are!

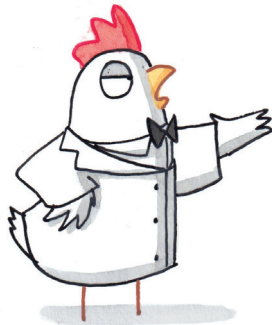


Good day.

I'm the Professor, and today I shall be lecturing you on the more practical side of humour in picturebooks. I shall demonstrate some of the methods that picturebook makers use to create humorous content.

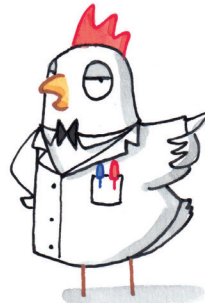


As you can see from my attire, I am a legitimate academic.



I'm going to demonstrate what I believe are the most prevalent types of humour found within picturebooks and analyze the mechanics through which they are delivered.

But first, you must fill out this participant consent form.



NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

DATE:

FORM NUMBER:

1. Do you have a sense of humour? **Y / N**
2. Do you have any medical conditions? **Y / N**
3. Do you have any issues with poo? **Y / N**
4. Do you have any criminal convictions? **Y / N**
5. Would you like any? **Y / N**
6. Do you have a history of monkey bites? **Y / N**
7. Are you wearing a bow tie? **Y / N**

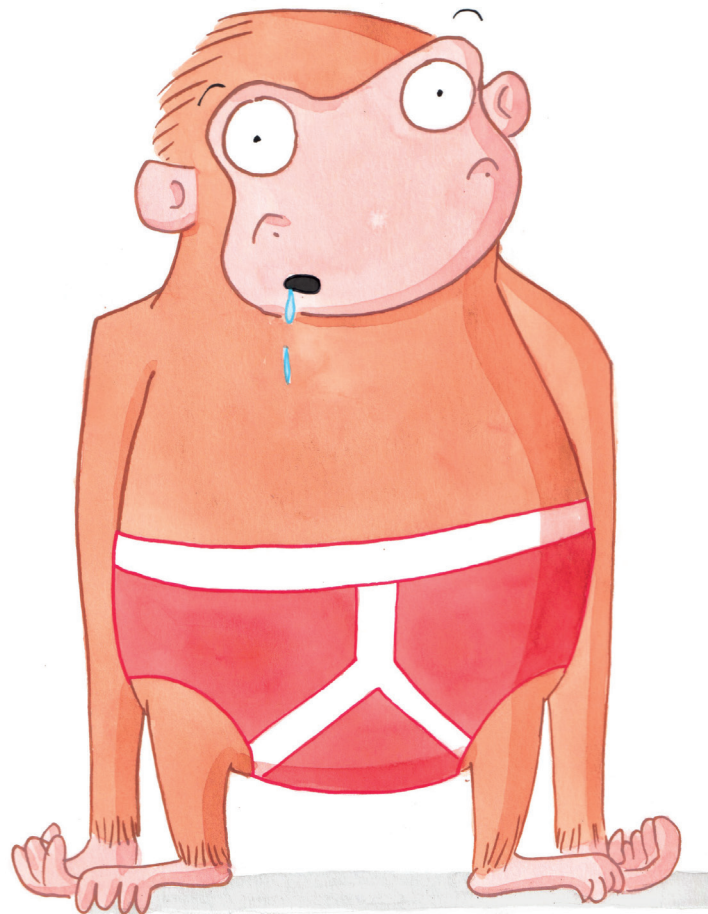
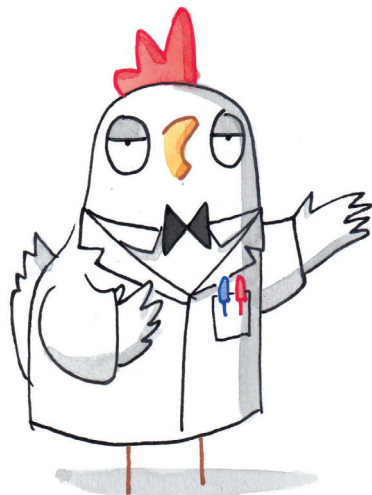
Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Name of participant (print)..... Signed.....

Date.....

PARTICIPANTS ARE FREE TO WITHDRAW AT ANY POINT WITHOUT GIVING A REASON EVEN THOUGH IT WOULD BE QUITE RUDE.

Now that you have completed the form,
please hand it to your Faculty Liaison
Officer to the right.



Conveniently, your Faculty Liaison Officer also happens to be my research assistant. Let me introduce you properly. This is Underpants Monkey. He'll be assisting me with some of the demonstrations.

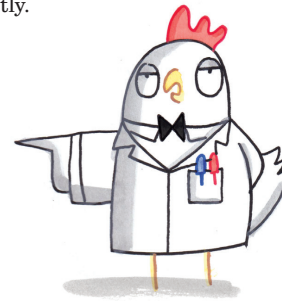


As you know, today I'm going to be explaining humour, or "funny stuff" as we academics call it. The issue is, as E. B. White and Katharine White state, "Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind" (16). By analyzing comedy, it is said that you dramatically diminish its humorous effect.

For example, take Underpants Monkey. If I tell you that...

This monkey is funny because he's wearing underpants and underpants are funny because underpants cover bums and bums are funny because bums are rude and rude things are funny...etc.,

it's much less amusing than if you came to this realization independently.



So, if you explain why something is funny or tell people what they should find funny, it automatically becomes unfunny...

...no matter how hard you try.



Therefore, we can safely assume that this process is going to ruin some jokes for you. If you want to see these mechanisms used to their full effect, do refer to the recommended reading I shall prescribe. Let us begin.

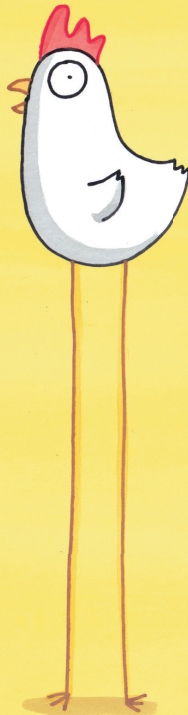
Exaggeration

This can apply to situations and settings, but in picturebooks, exaggeration is often used in characterization. If elements of a character are exaggerated beyond audience expectations (Brown 1992), it often creates a humorous effect. Let me show you:

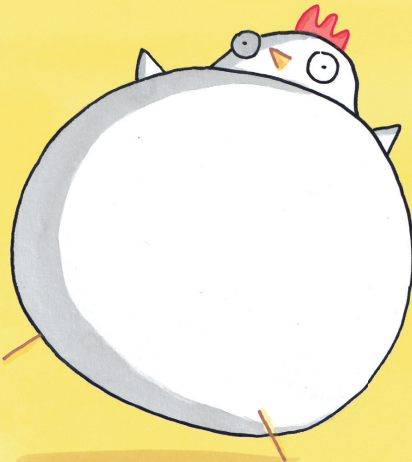


Hold my bow tie. This could get messy.

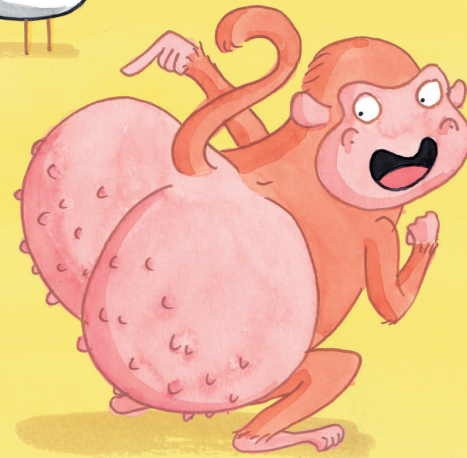
I could be implausibly tall.



Or excessively round.

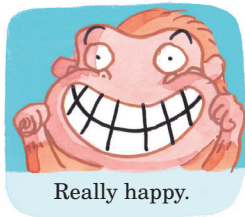


Or have absurd hair that no respectable academic would consider acceptable.

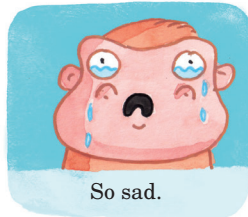


Thank you for your input, Underpants Monkey. That is applicable but perhaps not in keeping with the tone of this lecture. Now, let us examine a different form of exaggeration through characterization.

It's not just physical characteristics you can exaggerate for humorous effect, you can also exaggerate reactions or emotions. Underpants Monkey will now demonstrate some of his exaggerated feelings:



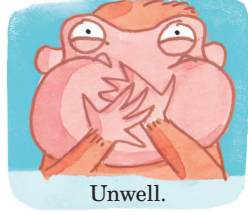
Really happy.



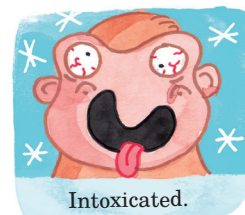
So sad.



Vacant.



Unwell.

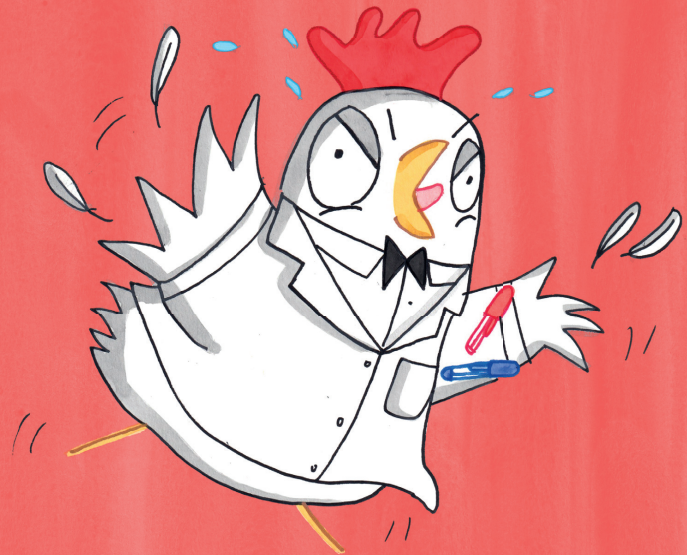


Intoxicated.



...wait!

MONKEY! DON'T YOU DARE DO THAT AGAIN!

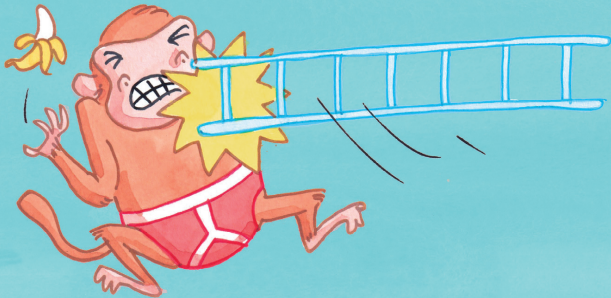


It is evident that emotional exaggeration can be applied to characters that embody self-possession and control. This break from and contrast to their typical behaviour intensifies the humorous effect.

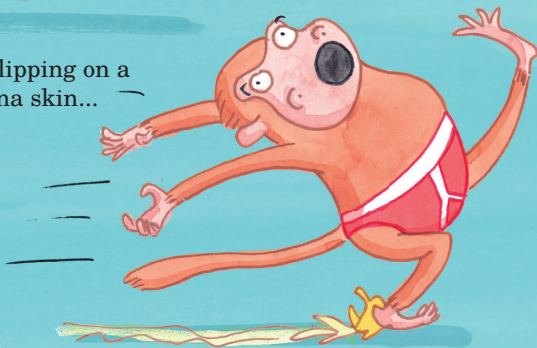
Slapstick

We can define slapstick as a kind of physical comedy that relies upon violence, physical punishment, and exaggerated misfortunes that are not truly life-threatening (Brown 194; Weitz 57). For example...

...getting hit in the face with a ladder...



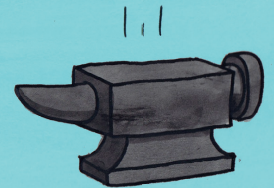
...then slipping on a banana skin...



...and then instantly getting kicked in the gonadal region...



...which causes your underpants to fall down...



...and then finally...





But why would we find such acts amusing? Theories of humour can offer some explanation. Superiority theory suggests that we find humour in a sense of superiority over the misfortunes of others (Levin 11). Misfortune is a key element of slapstick. Benign violation theory, or BVT (McGraw and Warner 10), suggests that humour occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling, or threatening (i.e., a violation) but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign). In this instance, the violation is the threat to physical well-being. What makes it benign is its fictional nature.

For instance, if I were to kick a real monkey in the gonads, it would be cruel, a malign violation. Underpants Monkey isn't real, he's a drawing, so it's fine because no one's really getting hurt.

Are they, Monkey?



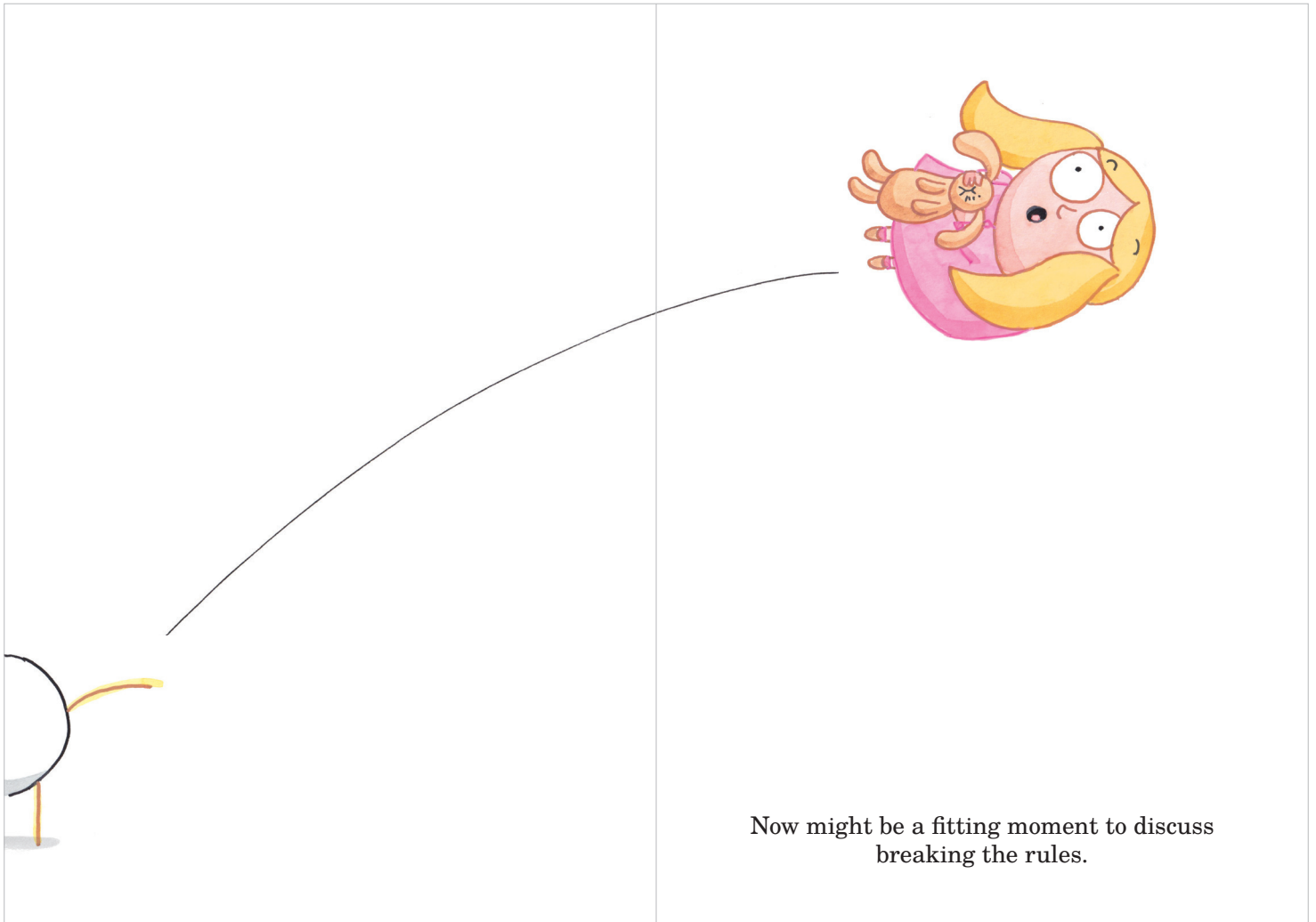
It could be said that such humour is highly dependent on the nature of the character. If the subject possesses a certain amount of emotional distance from the reader, it appears to help determine the effectiveness of the joke.



For instance, if I were to kick this adorable child in the face, it would not be as funny. This could be because human characters bear more similarity to the reader, so seem more real or “mimetic” (Nikolajeva 8). Therefore, the violation becomes malign as we empathize more with the character’s distress and the humorous effect is diminished.



So, clearly, it would be inappropriate to kick this child.



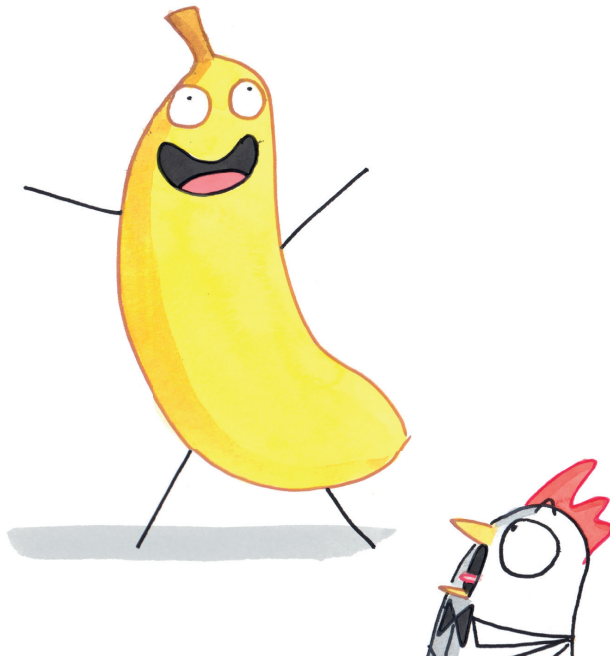
Now might be a fitting moment to discuss
breaking the rules.

Rule-Breaking

Yes, that's a great idea! Let me demonstrate. I could do something like shout

ARSE!

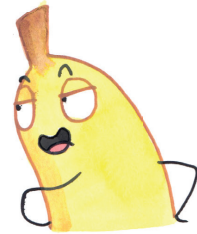
in the middle of an academic journal!



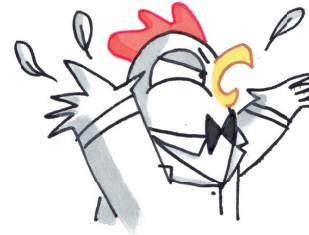
What right have you got to talk about humour? What's your publication history?



I'm Banana! Your monkey stepped on me earlier. I'm a well-known graduate student, and you can tell I'm fun-loving and hilarious because I speak in Comic Sans.



But... are you aware of the preconceptions associated with Comic Sans?



I'm a maverick who doesn't play by the rules. I defy conventions and laugh at authority, so I'm borderline unemployable.



Can you provide a compelling theory as to why any of this is humorous?



Relief Theory

Obviously.

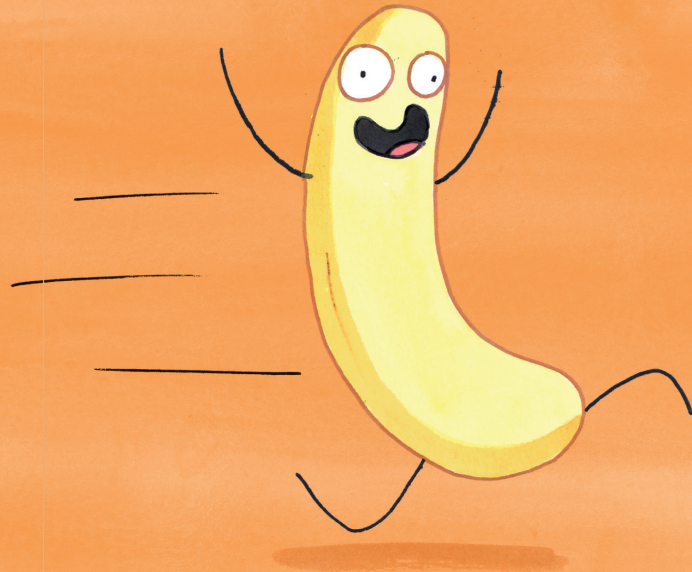
Relief theory suggests that we find something humorous when a convention is violated, causing a release of tension or restraint (Monro 353). So, when we break rules, which are social conventions in themselves, we find it amusing.

Equally, the humorous nature of the violation of social conventions seen here could be explained by BVT. It is benign because there are no real-life consequences to my actions. This is an article and the situation is fictional. So, there's no harm in breaking a few more rules...

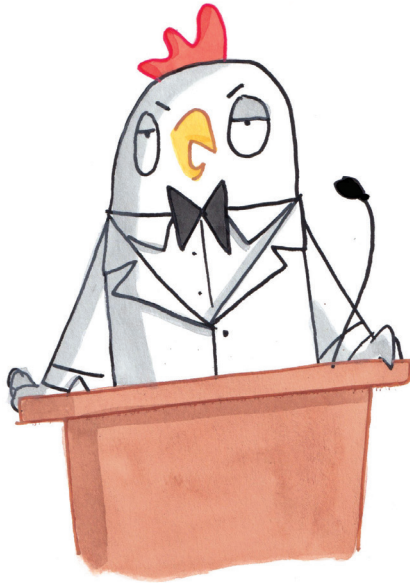


Observe me as I

STREAK!



Banana, it is time for you to desist because you are undermining the structure of my lecture. In addition, I cannot stand your font choice. I shall take over.



Rule-breaking for humorous effect in picturebooks is common. This can take the form of breaking social conventions and taboos or the violation of the physical conventions of the picturebook itself.



Do you know what makes rule-breaking even funnier?



What?

WHEN IT HAPPENS TO AUTHORITY FIGURES!



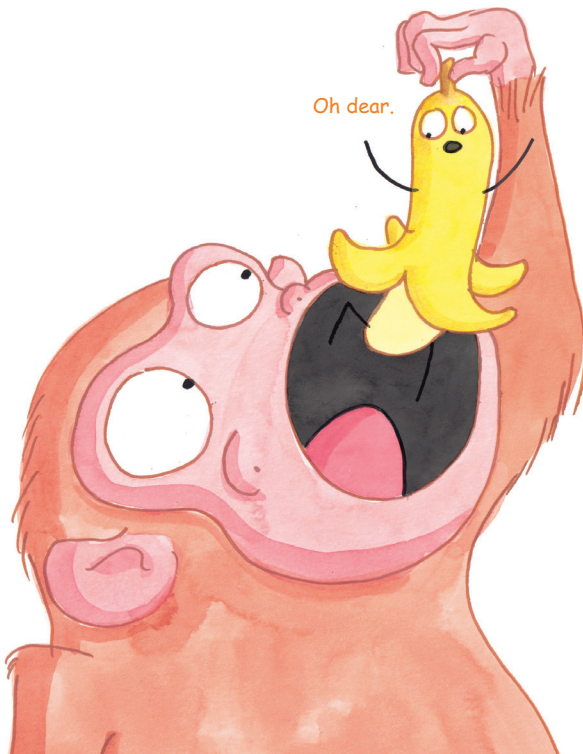
This situation could be seen as even funnier because it violates not only the social convention of not throwing eggs at people but also the convention that suggests we must show respect to authority figures such as teachers, parents, political leaders, and, of course, professors.

In addition, this could also relate to superiority theory. Such an offence to the dignity of an authority figure, the very sort of person who is often our superior, can provide the reader with a novel instance of feeling superior to them.



Not convinced?
I'll just throw a few more.

Underpants Monkey? Will you kindly remove this disruptive student from my classroom?



Thank you. I shall report him to his Head of Department when he comes out the other end. Though, after further consideration, I will concede that eating graduate students is a form of rule-breaking in itself, making this an effective demonstration.



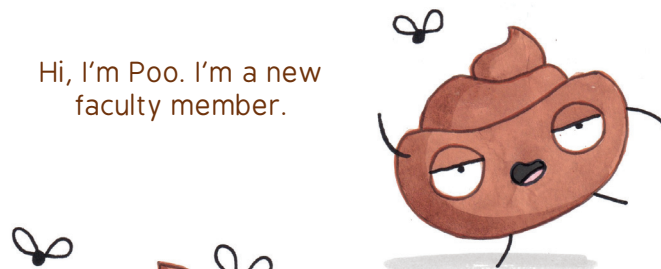
Speaking of the other end, we should probably address toilet humour. Come with me.

Oh excellent. That must mean it's time for my bit.



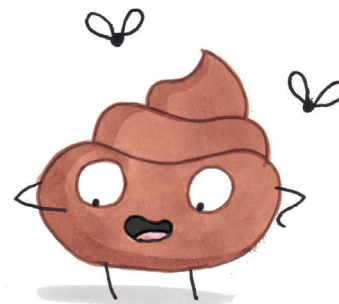
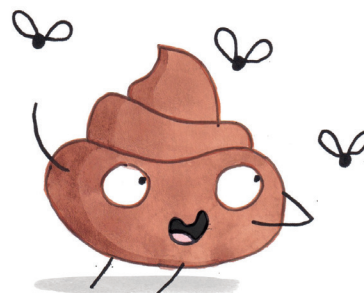
WHO are you?

Hi, I'm Poo. I'm a new faculty member.



I'm one of those modern lecturers who everyone likes.

I don't even wear a tie.



No... tie?

Toilet Humour

You'll find I'm quite the expert in my field. Maurice Saxby suggests that "physical functions of the body can be extremely funny" (317), for a young audience, so we simply must talk about toilet, or scatological, humour. We could define it as humour that relies upon the use of bodily functions, effluents, and taboo body parts. Examples



Oh yes, vomit! Excellent output, Professor.



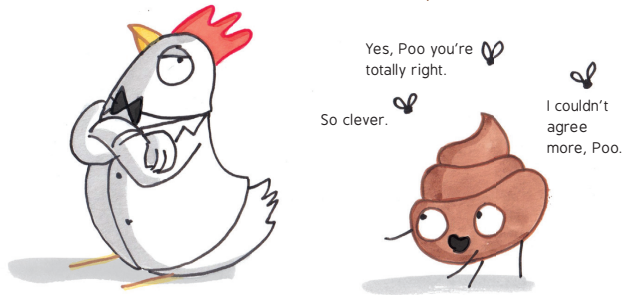
Then there's taboo body parts like bums. You really have a talent, Underpants Monkey!



Genitalia would come under this but may not be seen as age or culturally appropriate for a young readership.

I struggle to see why this is humorous.

Oh, but it is!



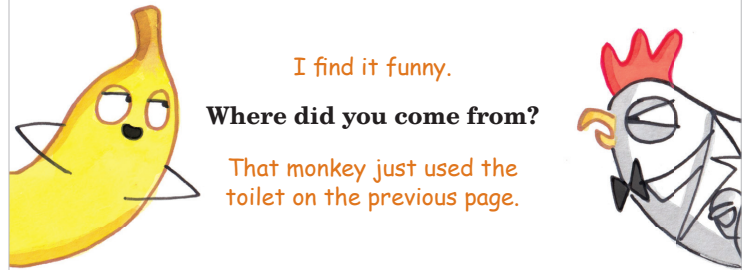
Many picturebooks utilize toilet humour, with varying degrees of subtlety. This perhaps relates to what Michael Rosen suggests, that “at the heart of a good deal of comedy is anxiety.” We experience anxiety around wee and similar bodily functions, concerning the shame around putting them in the right, or wrong, places. He suggests that taking these things out of the context of shame and using them for different applications, in this case for the serious business of comedy, relieves that anxiety. This ties in closely with relief theory.

It also fits with BVT. Displaying taboo bodily functions violates a social convention, but it does not cause serious harm. Though I admit *Underpants Monkey*’s gonadal region is perhaps a malign violation, which suggests that toilet humour can tread a fine line between malign and benign violation.

I find it funny.

Where did you come from?

That monkey just used the toilet on the previous page.

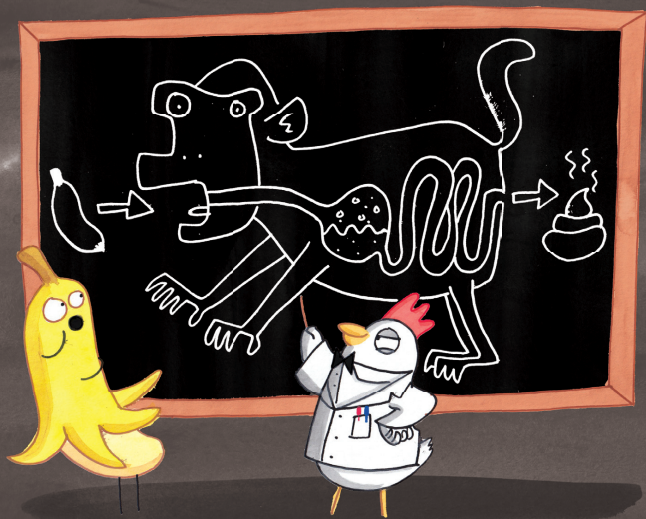


This excess of scatological humour is objectionable and, more importantly, not consistent with my lesson plan. Is a junior lecturer such as yourself even aware of the origins of poo?

No...



Allow me to enlighten you.



**I HAD
NO
IDEA!**

Come on, Poo. We
don't have to listen to
this.



BRIAN!

Oh no, it can't be. I
thought he was on
annual leave. It's...
it's...





...THE DEAN!

TREMBLE BEFORE THE DEAN!

By the way, we've had some complaints from other staff members that your behaviour is inappropriate, Brian. You had best step into my office.

Now Brian, this has to stop.
Poo was in here in tears.



Your parody of academia has gone too far. That's not even to mention the anthropomorphism! It's all just far too incongruous.

Could you explain how it is incongruous, sir?

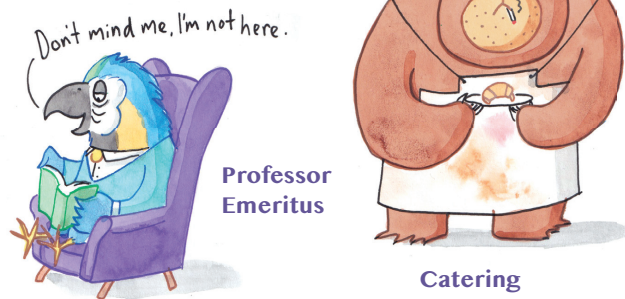
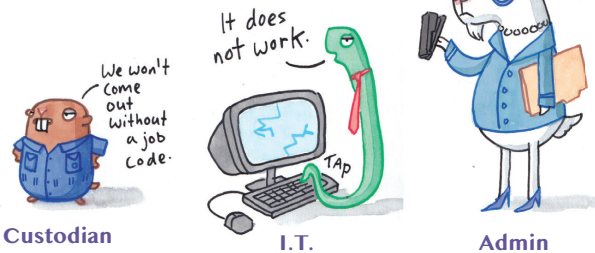


That should be obvious to a humour researcher. No wonder this department is in trouble. I am aware that humour can lie in the contrast caused by the juxtaposition of contrary elements (Rutkowski 130): incongruity, in other words. If those contrary elements relate to an existing style or genre and are presented in a manner of gentle mockery, we can call that parody. I strongly suspect that's what's happening here, don't you, Brian?

And I think it's obvious what exactly is being parodied. Just look at my departmental staff.

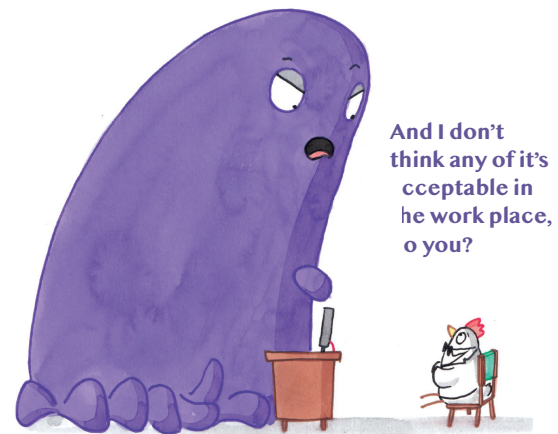
Incongruity

Through anthropomorphization.



They're blatantly anthropomorphized, Brian.

Now, this could be seen as humorous in itself. The combination of non-human characters in human situations is incongruous. But in this case, the humorous effect is taken a step further. It's clear that some of the conventions of academia are being combined with anthropomorphism, arguably a common feature of children's books, and both are presented in a ridiculous light. It's obviously mocking both academia and children's books. This entire situation is a parody, Brian, if not a satire!



I mean, for goodness sake Brian, you're a chicken in a bow tie and I'm a huge purple blob! You realize I'll have to inform HR. Now finish your lecture.

The Rule of Three

Where was I? Ah. Lesley E suggests that there's some about the rhythm of three: lends itself to comedy. Thr create a pattern of "set-up establishment and punchline (5). In picturebooks, we oft see that the punchline tak form of a disruption, or be violation, of that pattern. Observe Underpants Mon!



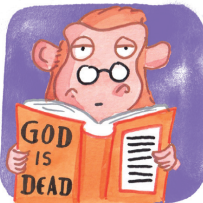
Monkey likes:



Banana.



Nose.

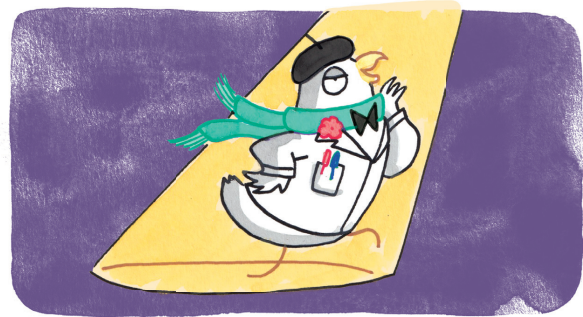


Nietzsche.

Note how he purports to like lowbrow things, but then that pattern is benignly violated by an incongruous contrast, his love of Nietzsche (about which I believe he is lying).

There are ways in which pacing can be utilized to deliver this disruption of a pattern with more impact. Allow me to demonstrate. Take the way I approach my job as an academic:

I do it with panache!



With vigour!



With BOW TIES!



Timing

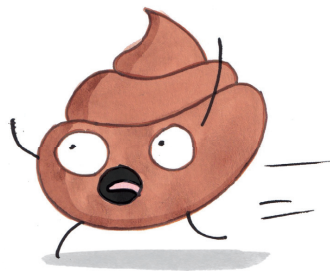
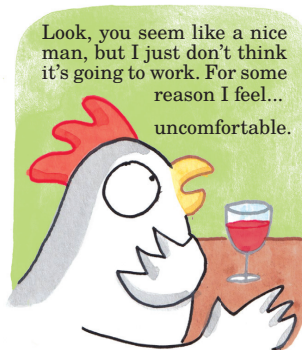
Note the page turn and scale change between the set-up and the violation. This is to create a change in the pacing.

Martin Salisbury defines pacing as the rate at which the story unfolds and can be controlled by “changing the viewpoint, varying the size of images and altering the actual design of the image on the page” (82). This is because, as Scott McCloud (100) states, we perceive time spatially when reading a visual narrative. It is by manipulating the amount of physical space dedicated to a particular moment, along with the space between such moments, that we can create the illusion of time passing.

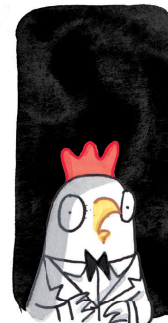
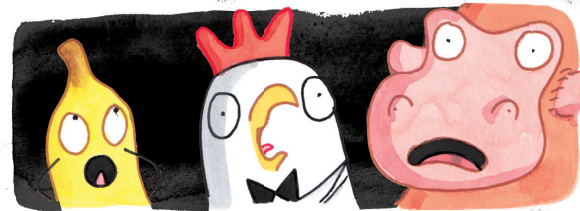
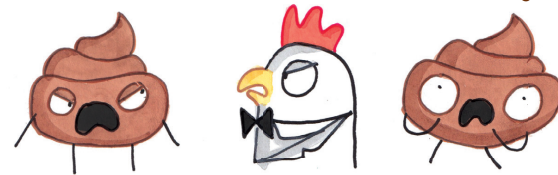
The page turn is significant in that it creates a pause in the sequence. We can utilize that pause to create suspense. In addition, the page turn conceals the punchline, creating the effect of surprise when the page is turned and the punchline revealed.

What I did here was use these tools of pacing for the purpose of creating favourable comic timing. The larger scale implies significance and invites the reader to linger on that moment. The pause and reveal of the page turn is equally important. This is because we can intensify a comic effect by placing emphasis on the pause before the payoff. The tension before the reveal of the punchline is often the key to a joke, so timing its build-up and eventual reveal is crucial. This is a more dramatic way of delivering a “rule of three” violation than shown in “Monkey Likes.”

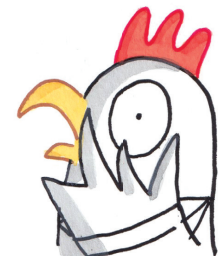
On the subject of reveals, adding new and surprising information in a scene can create a humorous effect. Allow me to demonstrate:



The Vice Chancellor is coming!

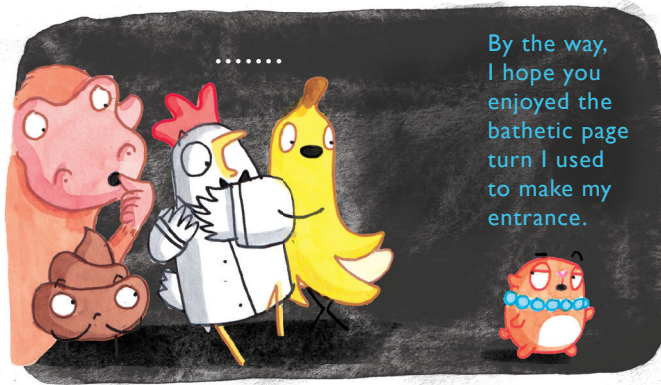
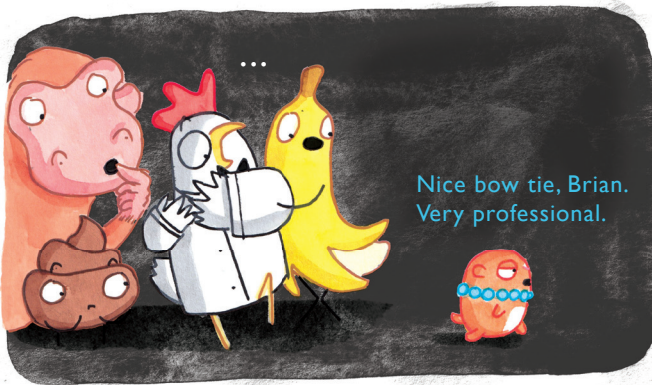


...she's ...here.



Gentlemen.





I heard you talking about pacing and page turns to deliver a joke and I thought, I could add a little something extra, a bit of bathos.

We could say that bathos is going from “the sublime to the ridiculous” (Brown 5), the “ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace” (Crangle and Nicholls 9). It can be seen in picturebooks when something is set up as being important, serious, or highbrow and then revealed to be the opposite.

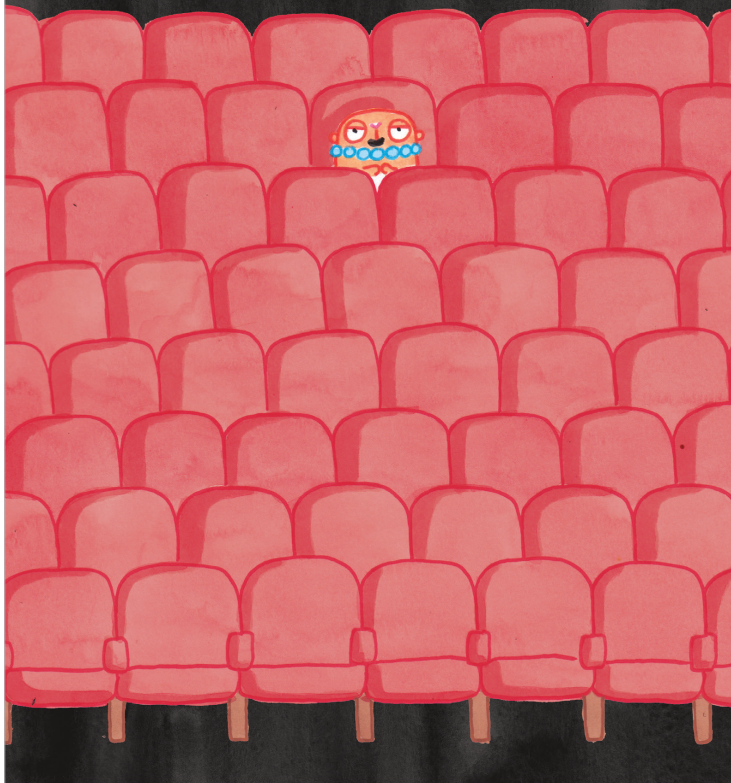
I did the same here because your twittering about my terrifying nature set me up as an imposing figure, perhaps a monstrous entity like the Dean, but the page turn revealed me to be an adorable little hamster, which I’m told can be a tad unexpected.

Comedian Richard Herring suggests that often jokes are based on the surprise caused when there’s a twist to our perceived logic. I dare say that’s what I was doing here. My appearance twisted what the audience had logically come to expect. I “benignly violated” it, as you would say.

I thought you’d appreciate that, Brian, as this is your specialism. Apparently.



Now, do carry on.
Just pretend I'm not here.



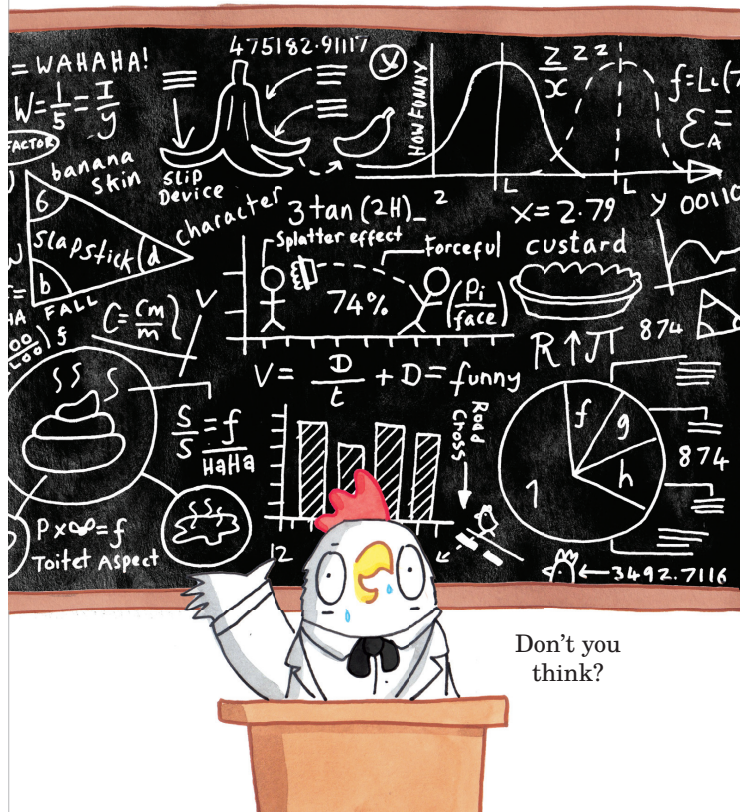
Um, okay!
Yes, of course,
ma'am. That
is absolutely,
totally fine
because...



...I'm
exceptionally,
astoundingly
well organized.
All my notes
are definitely
right here.



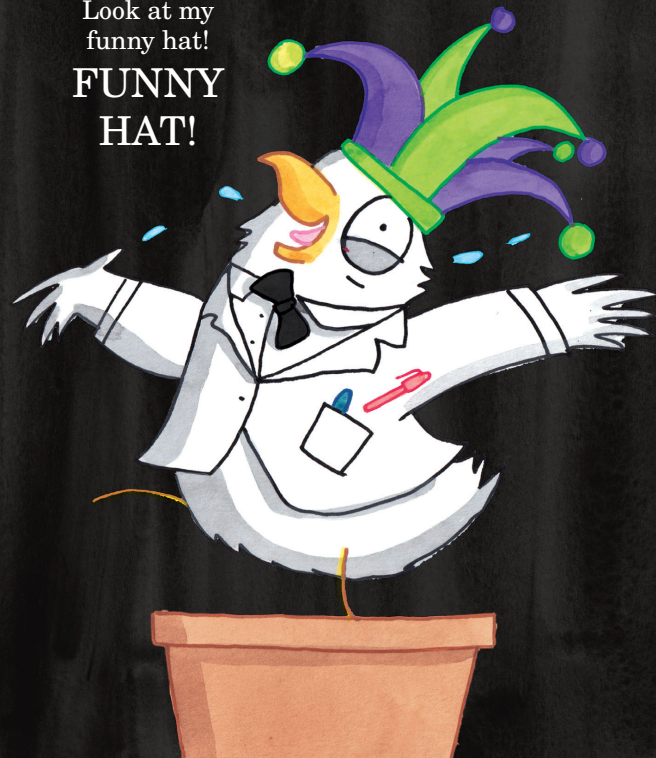
In fact, my research is so clear it speaks for itself.



Don't you think?

And my delivery is sophisticated yet entertaining.

Look at my funny hat!
FUNNY HAT!



And most importantly, I'm calm
under pressure. So calm!



Yes, it's **counterpoint!** When the words and the images provide different or conflicting information (Nikolajeva and Scott 17). Here you're using it for comic effect by saying what a competent lecturer you are in the text when it's obvious from the images that you're really a buffoon!

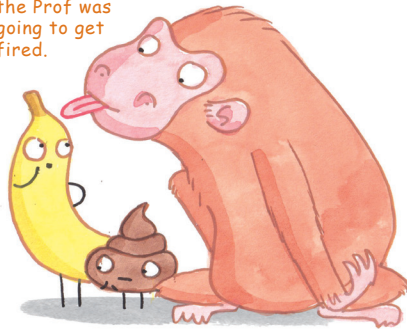


Most
satisfying.

Very good, Brian, you make the relationship between word and image so ironic, incongruous even! It benignly violates the expectations you set up through the words. It also really appeals to my excellent sense of humour.

Yes, that was exactly what I was doing. Of course. Obviously.

I really thought the Prof was going to get fired.



Now why don't you wrap up your lecture. Someone has this lecture theatre booked afterwards, you know.



Oh yes. Right. So, in conclusion, this lecture has not merely sought to explain the various techniques and devices used to create humour, but demonstrated them using the characteristics of the picturebook, including characterization, pacing, page turns, narrative, composition, and setting. Clever, no?



I believe to actively witness types of humour and comic devices in context...



...is the most effective method of communicating concepts that have a visual element...

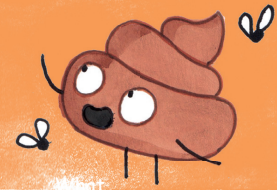


WAH



Did the Prof just fall through the gutter? I thought we'd done slapstick? Does this mean it's finished? Can we leave?

That was more than just slapstick. Often there's multiple kinds of humour at work to make something humorous.



Take Underpants Monkey...

You start with underpants.



Which embody toilet humour.

+



Monkeys don't wear underpants, so the premise is incongruous.

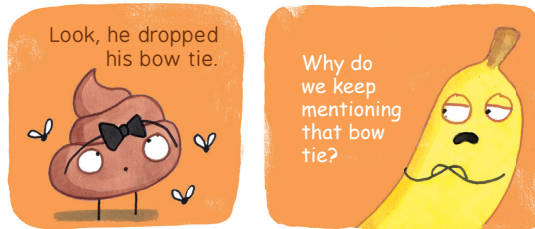
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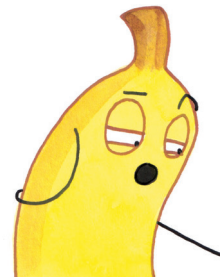
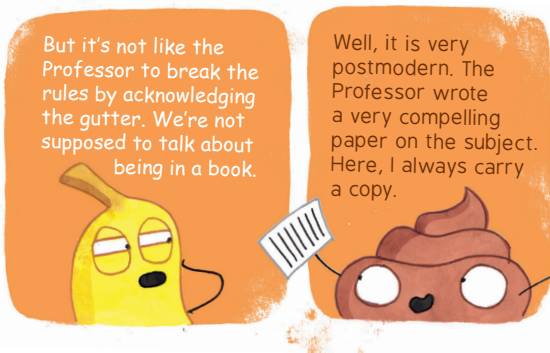
And Underpants Monkey is a satire of clichéd forms of humour.

So, you can see there's three types of humour at work here.

The Professor used slapstick, but he also benignly violated the conventions of the picturebook by falling through the gutter, an aspect of the book as an artifact that we are expected to ignore, so creating an incongruous situation.



I imagine it's a running joke or a subplot that the Professor has been setting up throughout this entire lecture. Repetition and familiarity can be versatile humorous devices. It could be said that these sorts of subplots are rather like a "call back," another humorous device. This is when a reference is made to a previous joke but often in a different context.



That's very wordy... hang on, can you hear something coming from down there?

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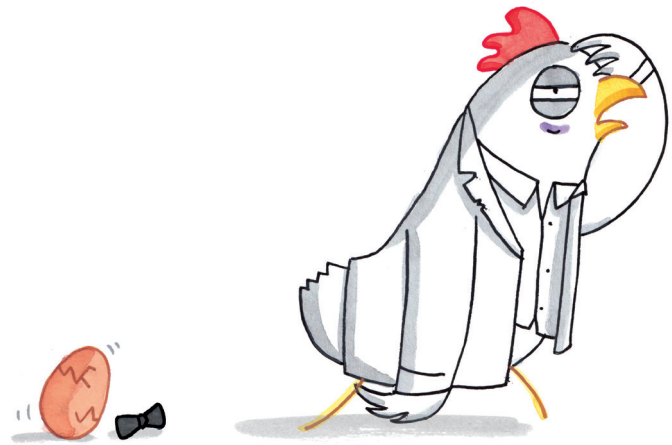
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And I think this just about brings us to the end of the lecture. Thank you for listening. I won't be taking any questions.



Instead, I'm taking a sabbatical.



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