

I believe the standard procedure on occasions like this is that if the speaker is feeling at all nervous they are advised to imagine the audience sitting there naked.

No offence, but I think I'll pass on that one.

This talk has gone through several changes as I've considered what to say, and has thrown up a host of different titles. One of them happened to be "How serious is humour?", which makes it sound like a disease, as if someone is asking if necrotising fasciitis is serious, or the Black Death. It's a clumsy title and I apologise for that. In any case I've changed it since then and have ended up with the more fanciful title: A WEEK IN THE DAY OF MYSELF. It's a fictional diary constructed from fact and I hope to give you some idea of why comedy and laughter are important to me - and also to my general well-being - and yours too, I hope.

Laughter really is the best medicine - clichés tend to be true. Laughter gets the serotonin flowing, it breaks ice, it defuses tension, it brings contentment, it distracts both the giver and receiver of laughter from from pain and depression, it encourages a sense of belonging to the tribe of laughers, it pays my mortgage and, as far as I'm concerned, it achieves something magical - **it gets young children reading.**

There are two things in particular that turn us on as parents with a new-born. One is a child's first words. The other is their first smile - and laughter quickly follows. Both these demonstrate, much to the relief of their parents, that the child is human. These are the things we wish to share. Smiling and laughing are part of the very foundation of our humanity - almost primeval in their origin. Remove them, or ignore them and what are you left with? A critic. (just joking - sort of.)

For me, laughter happens to be a big part of my trade and over the years I have noticed one or two things about comedy in the world of books that surprise me. I have inserted my observations into my fictional diary - so here it is. But I'll start with a word of warning from E B White. "Analysing humour is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested - and the frog dies."

Monday.

I'm planning to write all day today. Note I said that I'm planning to write. I never said I would, or could. It's more a matter of should and I hope I shall. I have little self discipline. Going to the shed is about as stern as I get with myself, and given that the shed has, in addition to my desk and typing chair, an armchair and fridge stocked with fruit, chocolate and wine, things could go either way. Some days are better than others - they're the ones that go both ways.

I have read, with despair, of writers who go to their desk at 9.00, write until midday and then stop. Or they write 1000 words and then stop. Such self discipline. Such rigour. It's beyond me. How do they do that? The self control - incredible. But I worry about them. Let's take the author who writes 9 till 12. What happens at midday if you are on a roll? The main character is in bed half asleep when, disturbed by a noise from the window and opening one eye he spies a lissom beauty slipping into his room, softly sliding out of her dress, moonlight playing upon her naked form. She makes her way towards the bed and oh, twelve o'clock. Time to stop. Does the writer put down the pen? I think I read that Terry Pratchett does just that. He likes to leave his day's work on a bit of an edge. It gives him something to look forward to completing the next day. But I can't do that.

Or there's writer number two who toils his way through 1000 words and then stops. Is that EXACTLY 1000 words? Does the author studiously keep count in his head as he works? Whatever, it raises the same problem of incompleteness, halting one's self mid-flow. I can't do that either.

So what do I do? Mostly I stare out of the window and go through any number of displacement activities. I find some biscuits - Nairns cheesy oatcakes are my favourite if any of you are thinking of sending me something for Christmas. Or there's the fridge and it's promise of fruit, chocolate, or wine. Don't get the wrong idea. I only buy small bottles. You can't possibly be an alcoholic if the wine is in small bottles. That's my thinking anyhow. The fact that there are 873 small bottles in the fridge may suggest something different. So I nibble some biscuits. I tidy the desk a bit, like a teenager before an exam. Pens there. Pencils there. Red pen there. mini wine bottle there, and there, and there, and there. I check my e-mails every five minutes - every two minutes if necessary. I try to think of people to send an e-mail too. There aren't any. I'm going to have to get on with some writing. I get my story up on screen. I write straight on to the computer. I read through the most recent sections, changing it here and there, smoothing the flow and so on. If I were an athlete this would be known as limbering up. Finally I begin to move the story forward. I'm writing fresh material.

This is where things get interesting. Sometimes it takes off, gets a life of its own, I'm not writing the story at all now, it's writing itself, I'm just a conduit, a path for everything to flow through. Writing in those circumstances is a doddle. It's a high, the best there is. Pure adrenaline is flowing and any disturbance is hated HATED HATED! GET OUT! GO! GO AWAY! I DON'T CARE IF NEXT DOOR'S DOG HAS EATEN YOUR HAND! GO AHEAD - HAVE YOUR BABY ON THE PATIO - **I'M WRITING!**

But those occasions are rare. More than likely the day will be full of hiccups, a stop start stop affair. It will feel toilsome, half hearted and lonely. I have to constantly go back to what I've done in order to administer artificial respiration to it, trying to get the heart of it going again - trying to find where the bloody heart is, if indeed it has one at

all. Sometimes a full transplant is necessary. I have to go back and start again, and again. I try writing the story in a different voice, or I may start at it at a different point, constantly prodding it, like a lock picker, trying different bits of bent wire until at last it springs open and hopefully opens on untold treasure.

Writing of any kind is a serious business. And writing comedy is no different. You have to work at it. This worries me because I've always thought; deep down, that comedy should be a natural process. One of my heroes is Ross Noble, the stand up comedian. At present he is embarking on a six week gig in London, where he will produce fresh material EVERY NIGHT, just riffing off his own imagination. That is genius. I am in awe. I want his brain.

But writing comedy all too often is not a natural process, it's manufactured. Think of those teeming ant hills of writer-ants who toil away to produce one episode of Friends, or The Simpsons for example. These shows are worked on over and over again, honing and refining all the time.

Even so, I still think that, as far as my own work is concerned, the best and funniest moments, are the ones that just arrived, that came flowing through that conduit when I didn't think I was even thinking. So, bit by bit, the story progresses. I'm near the end of this particular one and I'm pleased about that because it feels like there's a big work load and lot more to do before the year is out.

The phone rings. If I'm on a roll then I might ignore it or get through an answer as quickly as possible. But at other times a call can be welcome because it makes me feel I'm actually doing something instead of just sitting there waiting for my brain to arrive at the right platform.

Back to the writing - or rather, the biscuits. I check the time. It's gone midday. I could have a glass of wine. Maybe that'll help get things flowing. It does. I need the loo. The shed doesn't have a loo. It's the one bad thing about it. I have to make a trip to the house and that might mean more distraction - again, good if I want to be distracted. Gillie, my wife, my treasure, has quickly learnt to read the signs. Generally she waits to see if I say anything as I pass through. If I'm silent she tends to stay the same. It's fun having both of us working at home, but it has to be managed and we try to respect each others needs and space.

And so the day passes. Bit by bit, the story creeps forward. I get to the end. I re-read it. I read it out loud, always, to myself and often to Gillie as well. It's the best way to listen to what you've written. I tinker as I go, sometimes with just a small spanner and sometimes with a bloody great stilson wrench and a two-handed axe. Maybe tomorrow I'll send it off and see what my editor has to say. And all this time I'm checking with myself to see if the story is connected to the child in me - and to my audience. When I was a kid I told my mother I wanted to grow up and be a comedian. She said: You can't be both. I think she was right.

Tuesday.

Today starts with fan mail. Until recently I dealt with all of this personally but now I have had to get in help, usually my 20 yr old stepdaughter, Izzy, when she's home from uni. Izzy is a natural with children. I've watched her deal with the real thing many times and noticed how they instantly warm to her. I am working in the shed and Izzy is up in the house so every now and then she rings me. 'This boy has asked how old you are. I've said you're 256, is that right?' I tell her it's 257. She rings again later. 'This girl wants to know what your favourite food is. I've told her you like curried slugs on toast - is that okay?' I tell her to go for it and wonder if she'd like to be my full time secretary, PA etc. She's much better at this lark than I am.

Mail tends to arrive in gobbets, especially now that schoolchildren are actively encouraged to write to authors. I get snail mail and messages left on the website too that need answering. Mostly these are - you're my favourite author type of message, with endlessly repeated questions. But four other types of message pop up regularly. The first is - can you help me with my homework? - and the homework is not necessarily about my books or even about writing. The second begins: I want to be an author. Have you got any good ideas? Or: Please send me a good beginning,... A variation is: I have written a story, how do I get it published, or I have written a story, here it is. Screeds of writing follow, often semi-gibberish with no thought for punctuation, grammar or spelling.

Here's a typical one, taken off my message board:

Hi Jeremy I'm thinking of writing a story but I don't know what to do? Do you have any ideas? Should it be something funny or something adventurous? Rhi

The third type are random and inconsequential.

hi - 04:16 pm Monday 15 June

My ball popped lately but it was only £1. I am really disappointed though because it was quite a good ball. Well i can't do anything about it. :(sad face

And here is one typical of the fourth type.

Jenni posted

Hi Jeremy! - 08:18 pm Wednesday 25 February

.....And Jeremy, I need to vent my feelings to you. My EX-Best friend has hacked my account on a website and has turned two of my friends on there against me by saying rude things about them. Now their angry with me! I told them it wasn't me but they don't believe me. And I changed my password but the temporary password has been sent to HER email because when she hacked it she changed it! I'm very upset because I sent the temporary password without realizing it was going to be sent to her email, not mine. So I can't get on it

anyway and she can. And at school she's turned everyone against me. Ellie, another girl who's mean to me, has been saying nasty things as well. She's cruel and is calling me rude words and 'Little Miss Perfect' only because I've got higher marks in my tests than she has! What do I do? If anybody else has any advice then please post! I'm accepting any advice I can get! Thank You.

Jenni later wrote to say thank you for the advice and it had worked and everything was fine. But it throws up another serious side to writing comedy - of course these requests are not specific to comedy, but that's what I write and these children chose to write to me. It brings home the responsibility that all children's writers have to their audience. It has become increasingly clear to me over the years how much children look up to you and that places you in an important role that goes way beyond that of simply being "a writer". You can shatter their dreams with a wrong word or answer. And as you can see from some of these message board entries, it goes a lot further than that. I have my own personal example of being shattered.

LATIN EXAM

Written fan mail tends to be much lighter in content and is usually overflowing with compliments which are gratefully, and I hope gracefully received and of course I believe every word, a bit like the Viking one I used to introduce this section.

But for me, the best letters and occasional entries on the web site message board are the ones sent in by parents - almost without exception it's the mother who writes. They always carry the same message and it's the most important one there is for any children's writer. Quite simply they write to say thank you, my child (usually a boy) wasn't reading, wasn't interested in books, but they read one of yours and now we can't stop him. Bedtime is bliss - we fall about laughing. So thank you.

Now I am obviously not the only author in the world that this happens to. I imagine that most children's authors get similar mail. But this is hugely important to me because it is one of the reasons why I began writing for children in the first place. I'm an ex-teacher. My mission has always been to get as many children reading as possible. I choose to do it through humour. Or rather humour chose me as I find that I can't write anything serious. I am happy to read serious stuff - but I can't write it. I hope that eventually most of these rescued readers will progress to books by other writers and become lifelong readers. There is no way of knowing this, but I hope that at least it happens to some, that they'll move on to Morpurgo and Rowling, Mark Twain and Stevenson, Higson and Pullman and so into the adult world.

I was put off reading at about the age of ten by my parents and my teacher. Look at your big brother etc etc. Meanwhile, at school - and here we go back to the influence and thus responsibility that teachers wield - I was locked in a two year battle with my

primary school teacher - I had the same class teacher for two years and she was a monster. She got us to learn poems - Little Trotty Wagtail was one. Wordsworth's Daffodils was another. And our class reading book was - delight of delights - Black Beauty. This was followed up with, even more gripping - Little Women. I had not the faintest interest in Jo unless she was about to be mown down by a runaway carriage, hopefully pulled by Black Beauty. Did this monster teacher not notice that at least half her class were boys? Funnily enough my interest in reading went down. For a few years I hardly read at all.

But eventually, through the kind administrations of one or two adults I began reading again, voraciously. I realise I am preaching to the converted here in this hall, but I am also reminding myself of why we writers go through this endless toil at the end of a pen. It's in order to reach an audience and can be for various reasons - in my case it's because I want to get my young audience into reading and into books. And I'm also reminding myself how easy it is to put children OFF books.

When I began teaching, in the mid-70's, we used a book club leaflet that came once each term through which children could buy books. Some guidance was given - eg. A Pony In The Luggage, seven plus. Stig of the Dump, seven plus. I was teaching in a well heeled state primary on the 'right' edge of Sevenoaks. The children were bright and they had pushy parents. We had excellent academic success and well above average reading scores. But I quickly discovered that most of my 7-8 yr olds struggled with many of the recommended titles. Not only was the language difficult to read but sentence structure could be a stumbling block too. I began to write stories for my children that I thought they would be able to read and crucially, WANT to read. They began to get published. I'd like to say the rest is history and I shook the world overnight but I can't - however I can at least say that it's my history.

I tell you this now simply to give you some background to where my work came from, and perhaps why it seems to strike a chord with so many children and their parents. They can read it. They like laughing. One and one makes two.

And in the final analysis it's children and their parents who bankroll me. Even so I'm still not going to send Alma a late birthday present. She'll get the same as every other fan gets.

Sorting the mail takes up most of the day, but by mid-afternoon I have to throw a few things into a case, pack up my lap top and some books and head for the station. Tomorrow I shall be in Sheffield visiting a school in the morning and a library in the afternoon. First of all I have to get there. It will take about five hours, but at least I shall be able to work on the train.

Wednesday.

I like Sheffield, despite the three days I spent in hospital there a few years ago. Let's say I had a funny turn half way through the Sheffield Book Awards. My poor minder from Puffin, Helen, was in tears. I think she thought I might die and not only would she get told off by my editor, it was a Friday and she couldn't just leave me and probably she just wanted to be back home with her boyfriend, not staring at some ancient heap sitting in a hospital bed with three separate machines strapped to his chest via electrodes etc. Anyhow, it was all fine in the end. Just don't ask about the bedpan incident.

So, Sheffield. Why do I like it? Because they value books and have valued them for years. Not only do they run the Book Awards, but there is also the annual Off The Shelf festival as well as various other incentives to get children reading. They are a reading city and in true Yorkshire style forthright and practical. Ask why they put in all this effort and the short answer, delivered by a surprised-you-should-even-ask face, will be - 'because they all need to read, don't they!'

That makes it sound simplistic, but they know about their books up there. They've been pushing them, assessing them, awarding them for years. So I like Sheffield.

This morning I am in a school. I have two one hour sessions to get through. The first is with KS 1, 4-6 year olds, some of them just 7 maybe. There's a big difference between 4yr old and 6 yr olds, let alone if they're 7. The 6 and 7's can write. What's more they can write stories. Most of the 4/5 yr olds can't.

Speaking to children this young has its own problems and magic. Years ago I once spoke to 100 4/5 yr olds. I set up a display of books as they entered the hall and by the time I'd finished they were all sitting there quietly, waiting. Otherwise the room was empty. All the teachers had left. I am not exaggerating. This was about 15 years ago and even back then I remember thinking, this school hasn't got a leg to stand on if anything were to happen. It was incredible. Remember, these were 4/5 yr olds, with 4/5 yr old problems. Inevitably, as I talked to them, hands would go up. Can I go to the toilet? Okay. Do you know the way? Yes, Sure? Yes. Okay. Minutes later a boy comes back from the toilet and marches straight across to me. Can you zip up my fly? A girl wants her shoe laces tied. Another wants her hair band put back on properly. At the end of the session I have to send two children to find members of staff and tell them their children can go back to their classrooms now.

Leaving aside the sheer negligence involved in this incident, what have the teachers gained from it? What are they going to follow up? What was the point of my visit?

Sheffield won't be like this, I know. I've been here before. Several of the librarians are familiar to me, though embarrassingly I have met so many librarians over the years I can't remember their names.

The KS1 children file into the hall. They are excited; **am I really the author? Did I write all those books? Have I got a fish? No. I have a fish.** Do you? Does it have a name? **It's called Joey but it died.** Oh. I'm sorry. They settle down. I read to them a story about my children when they were very small. The oldest child is jealous of the new baby. It strikes a chord with many of the children and they love the pictures, where the oldest child gets in the baby bath with all his clothes on, and the warm, comforting picture of the mother breast-feeding the baby.

Then I tell them a little about where I work in the shed at the bottom of the garden. They are very interested and want to know more about the shed. Sheds are very interesting when you're four and a half. We talk about books and writing. At the end I wonder if they have any questions they would like to ask. Yes, lots of hands go up. I point at a child. What's your question?

My mummy got sore nipples when she was feeding my little brother. I redden, not sure what to say. Oh, that's a pity. Another voice immediately pipes up. **My mummy's boobs got SO BIG when she was breast-feeding, my dad said they looked like FOG LAMPS.** Oh! **And my mummy...** starts another. I hold up both hands in surrender. The teachers at the back are sniggering. Has anyone got a QUESTION? I ask desperately. Something they'd like to ASK me? One child waves a hand. At last, a question. Why does it rain?

The session ends but I have to go straight into a short classroom workshop on beginning a story. This is with 7 and 8 yr olds. We talk about what makes a good beginning and I set them to work. I give them a few minutes and then go round the classroom looking at their work and nudging them in the right direction if they need a hand. One boy hasn't yet finished his opening sentence. 'When it was Wednesday it was a h...'

'Okay, that's coming on, what are you going to put?

It was a house.

Oh, but when it was Wednesday it was a house doesn't quite make sense, does it?

He looks at his book for a while and shakes his head. 'no, he says. I meant it was Thursday.

I look at his face, but there's nothing behind the eyes so I just say I'll come back later and see how he's getting on. I'm laughing inside, but also wishing I knew how to help him, but I don't. Fortunately the session soon comes to an end and I can take a break in the staff room.

The staff room is full of women. There's one man in addition to myself but I think he's possibly morphing into a woman from being in close proximity for too long with this crew - I can almost feel the oestrogen and progesterone seeping into me.

It's the same with libraries - the crews are almost entirely female, always. As are the publishing houses - and most of this hall here tonight? The world of children and children's books is awash with women. I have no objection to this but I do sometimes wonder if it affects what children read, what gets published, what gets pushed in front of children. Does some gender bias come through anywhere - surely it must? And if so how does it manifest itself? And does that in any way equate to the poor regard with which comic writing is held?

One certainly can't say that women don't understand humour, or can't be funny. many of our best funny people on TV and in print are women - Victoria Wood, Louise Rennison, Sue Townsend, the cast and writers of SMACK THE PONY, many of whom went on to the wonderfully sublime and surreal comedy series, GREEN WING. And yet, and yet, a recent survey showed that of stand up comedians only approximately 17% were women.

Horace Walpole wrote: *The world is a comedy to those that think; a tragedy to those that feel.* Now I certainly would not say that men, being possibly more prone to comedy according to the above statistics, think more than women. But I would say that on the whole women fell more than men.

Until the Roald Dahl Award was established a couple of years ago, thanks to Michael Rosen and the efforts of a few others, comedy writing was largely overlooked in publishing, certainly as far as awards were concerned - overlooked, except by children. Thank God for children! The actual audience for whom these books are intended. They have their say on a few awards - The Red House Children's Book Award, in particular, and several others, though none to the extent that the Children's Book Award involves them.

So, we now have women writing to thank me for getting their children reading. Women running the primary schools, the libraries, the publishers. And I ask, is this a monstrous conspiracy? And the answer is of course not. It's just how things are. And the real question, the worrying question for me is - where the hell are the men? What are they doing? Why aren't they involved? Why don't they write thank you letters? Why don't they work in primary schools and with children's publishers? After all, there are plenty of male authors, especially in children's' books. I guess it'd probably be a pretty even split if you measured it. So why aren't they more pro-active in these other areas? Even the government has become aware of the dearth of men in primary schools and is trying to get more male teachers. Children need male role models. Often I am told this when I go to a school. We wanted a male role model. Oh, so you don't care about my writing then? But it would be churlish to say that out loud, or even think it.

So I shall leave this as a question for you to ponder, particularly when you are short listing titles and so on. Does the fact that most of you are women have any effect here?

The staff room at this school I'm in are hugely welcoming. They have gone to a lot of trouble to make me feel comfortable. There are cakes and biscuits, a massage from the headmistress and - no, just cakes and biscuits. But now I must talk to the 7 to 11 year olds.

They are chirpy as they come in to the hall and to be honest this is more my natural level, or habitat. These are the kind of children I used to teach - age wise at any rate. The session goes well. They laugh a lot - it's good feedback and they don't realise how much information they're taking in. At the end we move on to questions. How much money do you make? I explain about royalties and percentages - 10% etc. without actually divulging earnings at all. Did you really put the jam in doughnuts? Did you really fall out of first floor window when you were three? What's Kiss Chase? This lot have done their homework and have obviously been on the website, mugging up.

The session finishes. The school is selling my books and I stay to sign them. The boy who asked me how much I earned looks at the queue, patiently waiting to get their book signed. He makes his way across to me, hands in pockets. 'I think you'll be all right,' he tells me confidentially. 'You've made about twenty quid.'

It's time for lunch. A nice cafe, a nice lunch and I want to fall asleep afterwards. It's tiring, talking, talking, and talking. You use up an awful lot of adrenaline. You have to stay on your toes. Children generally come at you sideways or from behind.

Lunch has barely finished when I'm whisked off to the library. By a woman. She takes me to the library where I meet more women. I don't mind. I like being with women. I have nothing against them. My wife is a woman. So is my daughter. I have spent virtually all my working life in this hotbed of women, although hot bed might give the wrong impression. The last school I taught at, twenty years ago only had 8 staff - all women apart from me. I remember one occasion in the staff room when the conversation was getting increasingly gynaecological and I asked them if they'd prefer it if I left the room while they nattered about such thing. 'It's not a problem, said one, we think of you as an honorary woman. Compliment or insult? I'm still not sure.

The library session goes well, apart from one of the teachers who wants to sit at the front, near to me, to deal with troublemakers. It's okay, I tell her. I've learnt tae kwon do. She doesn't think it's funny and makes no sign of moving. I have to ask her to sit at the side or preferably, the back. I tell her the children will be fine. I want to also tell her that in my experience of visiting schools and libraries and talking to children it's the

adults who cause the problems, but of course I don't. The children often take their cue from their teachers, so I like to keep them out of their eye line if possible. I have seen children look at the teachers to see if it's okay to laugh. I have seen teachers poking children who were laughing at my story, telling them to stop. Oh my god, the child's laughing. Quick, get a bandage, Send for an ambulance. Laughter is highly contagious. Get that child into isolation at once. So, humour IS a serious disease indeed.

What is this about? Why is there this fear and disparagement of comedy - it seems to me sometimes that there is a steady devaluing of comedy going on. Oh, that's just a funny book. Read this one. It's all about the holocaust. You'll love it. Well I'm sorry but I don't think it's going to pull in any new or reluctant readers.

And yet - comedy in literature, whether for children or adults, is barely given a glance. Tv comedy, film comedy, theatre comedy gain rapturous attention and their own awards. Stand up comedians are almost heroes. Comedy in literature barely merits a one liner. Why? I haven't a clue. Only one other kind of writing gets worse treatment, and that is poetry. It's criminal, on both counts

At least in Sheffield ANYTHING that gets children reading is encouraged. The librarians and teachers here constantly note the books and authors that most appeal to children. Children are actively involved in the process of judging the Sheffield Book Award. In other words, children, who are after all the consumers here, are respected and valued. I leave on a high, feeling that the world is, after all, quite a good place.

Thursday.

I don't wish to talk about Thursday. It was a completely bad day.

Friday.

Today I am off to London. I have two meetings - lunch with my recently retired editor, Yvonne, and an author friend, Kaye Umansky, and then a meeting with Andy Stanton. I want to talk to them about the Patrick Hardy Memorial Lecture. Before I leave the post arrives and with it some review clippings. My book - MY BROTHER'S HOT CROSS BOTTOM is amongst them. It's a positive review but I happen to read on and the opening line of the next review catches my eye. It starts - "This book is also funny but without resorting to toilet humour." Oh. Here we go. I'm so sorry to cause offence. Have I let the side down (And I wonder which side it is?). What did I say? Was it

bottom, several times? Or was it when the whole family goes down the garden singing Hot Cross Bums? And I also wonder if this is why so many children like these books.

Let's make no mistake here. I am writing a book for 6 - 9 year olds, and I want them to read it and to enjoy reading it. And they do. Job done, as far as I'm concerned. I have no problem with toilet humour though I do try not to overdo it. Some people might mutter phrases like dumbing down and lowest common denominator, which is all very well but I would like to point out that a good half of the population might be classed as being in that bracket. Those are the people I would most like to reach - not the ones who are already reading, but those who are wavering around at the edges, uncertain about dipping in their feet, and the colder and less welcoming you make the water the less likely they are to enter.

I understand that I am seeking an ideal that is possibly unobtainable, but please let us remember that we all have to begin this literary journey somewhere, and if some passengers have to get on at Brent Cross instead of Hampstead remember that they too have a ticket and they are making a longer journey.

By the time I get on the train I have worked myself up into a minor rage and thoroughly confused myself with mixed metaphors all over the place. I brood on this business of toilet humour for most of the journey. At one point I even visit the toilet for some atmosphere. In some way it seems to me to be yet another reason for humour to be pushed into a dark corner. It's fine in adult films and and on tv, but we'd really rather not have it under our nose if it's in a children's book or, for that matter, one for adults.

I'm not sure why I feel so incensed by this comment, unless it's simply because it fails to recognise the power of humour and, in the case of young children, toilet humour in particular, of getting them to read and enjoy books. I don't take it as a personal attack. I've written well over eighty books now and within that bulk there are four or five - the FAMOUS BOTTOM series - that employ a small amount of toilet humour - that's approximately one twentieth of my output. Why am I saying I don't take it as a personal attack? Who am I kidding? Of course I do. I'm thoroughly hacked off!

Interestingly Terence Blacker had something to say about humour in general in the summer issue of THE AUTHOR. He comments on what one must do to be recognised as a respectable author and says: NO JOKES: The literary world appreciates wit in the pages of a book but only in the context of intelligence and seriousness. Laughter for it's own sake is regarded as highly suspect. In all dealings with fellow authors your conversation and prose will benefit from a light dusting of irony, but outright jokes and any kind of laboured facetiousness should be avoided at all costs.

Let me be clear (I hope). What I am bemoaning is the comparative lack of recognition for humour in the world of books. Until the Roald Dahl award came along the books that made it onto shortlists were overwhelmingly those that dealt with issues, divorce, bullying, death in the family, drug taking,. Aids - the list is endless - as are the social problems and the titles that deal with them.

Yvonne and Kaye and I talk only briefly about the lecture - this is because the menu at Fish Works is much more interesting and besides I haven't seen either of them for months and we have other things to talk about such as what we did in our holidays. Anyhow, I ask them if they think what children read is influenced by the vast scrum of associated women, but I guess it's like asking a lion if they like eating meat. Later I spend two hours nattering with Andy Stanton, mostly about writing itself, but also about this talk. He makes the point that the bottom line (no pun intended) is that children need to be listened to. It's disrespectful to belittle what they say and think. And it is.

On the train going home I pick up a magazine that someone has left behind and leaf through it. My eye is caught by an article: WHY DO MEN HAVE A GROSS SENSE OF HUMOUR? My attention is gripped. I read on.

A "behaviour expert and psychologist" writes : "Men use toilet humour to bond with their mates and prove their masculinity.... Humour is also a way of coping with the social shame of poor toilet habits (!) a recent study found men are more embarrassed by their bodily functions than women" I don't think the psychologist meant that men find *women* less embarrassing than their *toilet habits*.

I might point out that this article was written by a female psychologist and published in a women's magazine, so there may be some faint bias there, although when I read it to my wife she, much to my chagrin, nodded emphatically in agreement.

However, and this is important - I don't believe this observation applies to children of both genders around 5-10. My personal experience leads me to believe that both boys and girls respond to the humour, as well as to the books in general. What's more, my readership is split roughly half and half. I see no reason to apologise for placing toilets in my writing from time to time.

So perhaps this is where my awareness of the situation becomes illuminated. It's simply a case of women versus toilets. But going beyond that rather limited subject matter, as women, do you think you tend to veer towards the emotive story - the issues, big and little - at the expense of what you might think is the trivial, the comical? I think we should look at the bigger picture, not just the subject matter of books, but what gets children reading, especially boys. And here I wonder if perhaps there's a faint echo coming through from my monster teacher of long ago and Little Women.

Before answering (and I hope your response will not be too much like *The Bacchae*) I would like to finish by quoting briefly from an article I was asked to write recently for a booklet which aims to give advice to parents on reading with their children. I wrote:

Finally, I would like to think that there is a place on the book shelf for everything and that children will become more sophisticated readers as they get older - but unless we snare them with our magic, whether it be comedy, wizardry, horrible histories, or reinterpretations of Milton etc, unless we snare them, they won't become readers at all, either as children or adults.